

TEACHER ATTITUDES REGARDING INTERACTIONS WITH 8th GRADE
STUDENTS

by

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The Problem: Classroom management and success of students is difficult to maintain if teachers do not know their students and build and maintain appropriate relationships in the classroom. Very little discussion is to be found on the importance of relationships with students in the classroom and the skills teachers use to foster these relationships. Teachers also spend very little time reflecting upon these relationships and talking with other teachers about the needs of their students.

Procedures: In the following study the behavior referrals of students from their 7th grade year are used to fuel discussion with teachers and administrators about how they interact with students and what, if any, reflection they do regarding their students outside their academic needs. Eight 8th grade teachers and two middle school administrators from the same urban Midwestern middle school were interviewed to determine what strategies were being used and what the needs of the staff were regarding building and maintaining relationships with students.

Findings: Although many strategies emerged throughout the interviews teachers and administrators showed a genuine concern for the well being of their students and teachers, there was little time prioritized for staff dialogue and professional development regarding building and maintaining relationships with students. It was discovered that some form of relationship with each students was important and that families and communication play a role in those relationships.

Conclusions: Teachers and administrators saw the need to get to know students on a personal level and held the strategies to do so in high regard. There is little time, however, to facilitate discussions during planning time or professional development time because of the focus on other academic goals of the building. Each teacher in the sample did show that they used time in class to get to know students and were concerned about the well-being of their students.

Recommendations: Teachers should be allowed professional development time to talk about students and how to build and maintain relationships with them. They felt as though they needed to focus on academic goals during class time, but also saw a benefit in time for reflection and discussion of their students' needs. Staff development needs to include time for those discussions and the sharing of skills and information to become more cognizant of students and their lives.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The relationship that a teacher can foster with students may be the key to effective classroom management and the success of students. Many teachers seem to have this innate skill and administrators see the relevance of relationship building in the classroom. However, very little reflection is encouraged of teachers regarding relationships in contrast to classroom lessons and pedagogy.

The school experience can bring about negative emotions as well as positive, and the response to school depends very much on how the student will focus in the setting. The school “places one constantly into situations with which one must cope” (Ruus, Veisson, Leino, Ots, Pallas, Sarv, and Veisson, 2007, p. 922), which may be a threat or a challenge to students. Relationships with teachers are especially important to the success of high risk (multiple behavior referrals) students, both minority and Caucasian. The research of Ruus et.al (2007) indicates that the most important relationship becomes the one with a teacher that gives support on which a student can rely.

There is some question as to how teachers can help adolescents become young adults who continue to pursue an education and contribute positively to society. Classroom behavior and relationships with teachers may affect how students view themselves and the world around them.

The attitudes teachers have toward students in their classrooms and how they view their interactions with students may have a direct effect on how teachers talk about students and how students are viewed by other teachers and administrators. It is unclear from the literature whether teachers truly do reflect on their interactions with students and the effect this may have on the students in their classrooms. After a basic child

development and psychology course in their undergraduate teaching training programs, teachers may not revisit the need for adolescents to connect with adults for the rest of their lives. Indeed, “the perceptions of teachers as one of the main parts of the teaching and learning system have not been publicized enough” (Korkmaz, 2007, p. 389).

Students making the transition from middle to high school are approaching a critical time in their lives that involves much decision making. LeCroy (2004) noted that “most adolescents do not have access to the resources and support structure they need” (p. 436). There are teachers in all school buildings who have the skills to build and maintain positive relationships with students, either through innate skills or experience of many years of relating with students. In fact, Rimm, Rimm-Kauffman, & Rimm (1999) encouraged parents purposely to pick schools for students in the middle and high school age range that have dedicated and inspiring teachers.

There are factors in the classroom over which teachers have control, despite the home lives of students, their social lives outside and inside the classroom, and academic abilities. It is unclear whether teachers see how they can affect students emotionally and behaviorally in the classroom and whether those skills are learned or innate to the personalities of individual teachers.

The researcher in this project was a vice principal in an urban Midwest middle school. The population of the school was approximately 500 in grades six through eight and over 90% of the students lived under or near poverty level according to federal free and/or reduced lunch information. The building was 66% minority students; half of those students were African American and half were Latino. The researcher worked in this

district for seven years and at the building to be researched for four. She was very familiar with the needs of the students, families, and teachers of the building.

However, a confounding problem was seen over two years while looking at the 8th grade class and the students who had so much potential to be successful in high school as they transitioned through the last year of middle school. The teachers that these students had in the classroom needed to connect to them in order to teach appropriate behavior and help them transition. Many of the teachers were doing this, and doing it very well, but when it was discussed during team meetings and with individual teachers, they struggled to define what they were really doing to help these students.

Administrators in the building, including the researcher and teachers on the 8th grade team recognized which teachers were connecting to the students, many of whom could be very difficult. They each saw that there was an important connection being forged, but were not replicating it when needed or when the opportunity arose. Even the teachers who were fostering relationships and creating those important connections could not quite define what they were doing that made the difference with the students they were seeing in classroom and hallways.

It was extremely important in this middle school to prepare students for the difficult transition to high school. Many students would have less support from high school teachers as the subject matter became more difficult. There were five times as many students in the feeder high school for the students of the middle school as there were in their current school, and behaviors that were addressed by outstanding teachers in the middle school may lead to loss of credit and dropped enrollment in classes in high

school. However, many teachers could not describe what they were doing that successfully prepares students, especially those at risk, for this transition.

Purpose of Study

The intent of the study was to discover what methods teachers used in 8th grade classrooms to establish rapport and build relationships with students. This involved teachers reflecting on what they were doing when interacting with at-risk students in the classroom. Also, the perceptions and attitudes teachers had toward students in the classroom were closely studied to determine whether those perceptions and attitudes affected interactions with students and the number of behavior referrals regarding individual students in the 8th grade.

The intention of the study was to discover what teachers were doing to build relationships and what they saw as their own role in doing so. The researcher hoped to discover what reflection was happening with teachers, how students were behaviorally successful in the classroom and what each teacher was doing to help this happen.

Rationale and Significance

As indicated earlier, the transition from middle school to high school is incredibly important to the success of adolescents. Teachers have a considerable impact on how students view themselves and interact in classrooms and hallways. Unfortunately, it was unclear whether there were identifiable methods that led to positive relationships with students. There was significant research on the importance of relationships and the success of students in schools (Antrop-Gonzales and de Jesus, 2006; Brendto, Brokenleg, & VanBokern, 2002; Cook-Sather, 2006; Fromm, 1956; Hargreaves, 1994; Marlowe, 2006; Noddings, 2003, Sizer and Sizer, 1999; Stipek, 2006; Walsh, 2006); however,

much of the research did not address the practical skills teachers can use to connect with students.

It may be the case that teachers did have the skills to interact positively with students, but may not have had the time or initiative to reflect on what methods they did or did not use to facilitate relationships. These methods may have been discovered through reflection and culled into a theory of operation that may help other teachers be more effective at classroom management.

As students entered the transitory period between middle and high school, the fear was that those who did not succeed would become statistics in the dropout literature. However, as Orenstein (1994) pointed out, it may be that the students “aren’t dropping out—they’re being pushed out. We have to stop pointing at them and start pointing at ourselves” (p. 173). Educators could not change the lives of our students outside the building, but there was a chance for them to make the needed difference in the hours they had students. By choosing to influence what they could instead of blaming society, such as the attitudes of students or other factors, educators could be able to look at their own behavior and attitudes. Teachers can take into consideration that behaviors such as “[d]isrupting in class, defying authority, and participating inappropriately become acts of resistance, assertions of self in the face of a school system that insults and rejects them” (Orenstein, 1994, p. 183). It may be part of the job of all educators to discover how to break down the walls between students and teachers that contribute to these behaviors.

Hines and Paulson (2006) noted that “[e]arly adolescence is viewed as a difficult time for children and their parents and teacher” (p. 600). Now that educators understand the problems associated with early adolescence, they must continue to discover what can

be changed in teaching behaviors to help children through this difficult time. Researchers have spent much time discussing the needs of adolescents; now educators must move forward to the question of what factors initiate change and relationship building.

This study had the potential to benefit students, parents, teachers and administrators. Although the data could not be generalized past the population being studied, the themes addressed may become part of discussions beyond the site of study. Once it was determined what actually worked for individual classroom teachers, those methods could be tried by others. The information could be used by staff to move past the individual teacher and devise a group goal to use the methods that seem to be the most effective for individuals on the grade level team.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, 8th grade students were between the ages of 13 and 15 and had been at the research site for the 2007-2008 academic year and the spring semester of 2009. Minority students included all students who were not Caucasian, including Latino and African-American. Also, the research followed the federal guidelines for poverty through the free and reduced lunch program.

The Problem

The purpose of this study was to discover what 8th grade classroom teachers believed they were doing to help make at-risk 8th grade students more successful in transitioning to high school. What did teachers perceive they were doing to foster relationships during classroom instruction? Could they reflect on the specific strategies they were using? Did administrators see a need to focus on relationships and give teachers time to do so?

The broad goal of this research was to discover what teachers believe themselves to be doing to establish relationships with adolescents. Did they know they were fostering relationships during classroom instruction? Could they reflect on what specific skills they were using? Could the skills be transferred to others through conversation and dialogue in a professional development setting?

Chapter 2 Literature Review

Interpersonal Relationships

The relationships that teachers established with students did have a significant effect on behavior and academic achievement. However, it remained unclear as to how teachers built these relationships and what they saw as important aspects of those relationships. Research on students from elementary to high school levels showed that students saw the need for a trusting, supportive relationship with adults, including teachers (Cook-Sather, 2006; Kindlon, 2006; Miller & Pedro, 2006; Orenstein, 1994; Sizer and Sizer, 1999; Thompson, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999), but there was very little written evidence that teachers understood this need and built their classroom procedures around relationships.

The relationships in classrooms seemed to be dependent on several variables. The relationships should be caring and built on trust. The teacher's beliefs, emotions, and expectations played a role in how the relationships were fostered and maintained along with the cultural background and gender of each individual student. The healthy teacher-student relationship included high academic expectations for the student and also fulfilled a need for the teacher to see students succeed. The relationship was grounded through frequent communication with parents and the motivation for the student to succeed at all costs. This was not an easy task; it involved significant reflection and energy from the teacher.

Students understood and needed to have at least one positive relationship with an adult in a school setting. Researchers cited this need through student interviews and observations (Antrop-Gonzales & Ridenour, 2006; Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson,

& Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Marlowe, 2006; Rimm, Rimm-Kauffman, & Rimm, 1999; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Schussler & Collins, 2006; Stipek, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). All information gathered determined that students recognized the effect of one or more teachers on their attitudes, behavior and achievement in the classroom.

Through the research in two Latino community-based schools, including in-depth interviewing and participant observations, Antrop-Gonzales et al. (2006) interviewed students who saw the benefits of relationships with a teacher. Although they were focusing on the two given schools, they noticed that “while the size and scale of these schools is an important condition for success, the relevance and quality of instruction and the interpersonal relations that form inside these schools is far more significant” (p. 410). It was the quality of the relationships that led to the success of students, and that was clearly seen in the research. It was not just an academic change that fostered success, but also the attitude change of teachers working with and connecting to students.

The students who participated in the study by Antrop-Gonzales et al. (2006) were vocal about how important the teacher-student relationships became in the two given settings. Many students described in detail what they considered caring teaching to be, including “those who, through their actions, emphasized the importance of close student-teacher relationships and hold students to high academic expectations” (p.423). Students also discussed in depth the need for authentic caring from teachers.

Through the readings of Torey Hayden, Marlowe (2006) also noted the need of students to have a relationship with a teacher. However, Marlowe noted also that the relationship was not just about the teacher caring for and having concern for the student, but also that the relationship was reciprocated. Torey Hayden felt that the best classroom

relationships, as discussed in her works, including *One Child* and *Somebody Else's Kids*, were those in which she also felt cared for. The relationships then became a “mutual exchange” (Marlowe, 2006, p. 97).

The authenticity of the relationships was an important point for students discussing connections with a teacher. Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) recognized this in their discussion of teacher presence in the classroom. They noted a point when students felt as though they connected and it became a “sense that they have really got (sic) to know their teacher, that their teacher allows herself to be known, the relationship becomes real” (p.278). It was a process that took time from both the student and the teacher, but the effort produced that authenticity desired by the student.

Schussler and Collins (2006) interviewed 16 students at one alternative high school in-depth and saw the importance of the teacher-student relationships. The students went beyond just describing the relationships to recognizing that it was multifaceted and served several needs. All the participants described teacher relationships using “words like family, love, care, personal relationships and supportive” (p.1468). As they described the relationships, the students also noticed that “the more personal relationships made teachers’ intent to care more visible to student perceptions” (p. 1474). The students had to connect with their teachers before they recognized the caring of those teachers. In discussing their teachers, the students came to recognize that they “wanted to be able to relate to their teachers on two levels. They wanted to communicate openly and relate to their teachers in a personal way, like with friends. They also wanted ‘the security and unconditional care associated with a good parenting relationship’” (p. 1490). The

reflections on teachers led students to recognize that the relationships had to be multifaceted to serve their needs.

Students become risk-takers when they feel safe with teachers. Stipek (2006) recognized the need to challenge students through the lens of relationships. When relationships are secure, “they are more comfortable taking risks that enhance learning—tackling challenging tasks, persisting when they run into difficulty, or asking questions when they are confused” (p. 46). Relationships were seen as the springboard for deeper, more advanced learning in a safe environment.

Unfortunately, students did not always experience the type of relationships that led to a positive learning experience. In her study of several schools in southern Texas, Valenzuela (1999) talked to many students who saw school as a negative place where they had very few, if any, positive connections with adults. Although they desired that closeness, it was “tempered by their experience, which teaches them not to expect such relationships” (p. 104). Once students reached middle and high school, they may have experienced an education without relationships and were very hesitant to open themselves to adults at school.

Teachers often recognized the importance of teacher-student relationships when reflecting on classroom behavior and pedagogy. Through narratives, interviews and observations, much research has been gathered on why teachers saw relationships as important (Antrop-Gonzales et al., 2006; Collier, 2005; Hargreaves, 1994; Hebson, Earnshaw, & Marchington, 2007; Korkmaz, 2007; Marlowe, 2006; Noddings, 2003; Noddings, 2005a; Rimm et al., 1999; Russ, Veisson, Leino, Ots, Pallas, Sarv, & Veisson, 2007; Shultz, 2003; Sizer & Sizer, 1999; Strahan & Layell, 2006; TeRiele, 2006;

Valenzuela, 1999). The thoughts of teachers combined with student beliefs to exhibit the need from both sides.

Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, and Neumark-Sztainer (2005) looked for the characteristics of teacher-student relationships in the middle school setting, hoping to find a way to show that relationships are a protective factor for students. Through survey results, they discovered that “adolescents who report feeling supported by school staff, family or peers display more effective coping mechanisms and communicate a more positive attitude about their future” (p. 267). The 4,746 participants often talked about relationships with teachers being “among the most meaningful in their lives” (p. 269). This led the researchers to wonder how relationships affect “motivation, achievement, feelings of belonging and affect in school” (p. 269) which were recurrent themes in the data.

The teacher-student relationship was also important when discussing how girls become successful women. Rimm, Rimm-Kauffman, and Rimm (1999) pointed out that when interviewing 1,000 successful women, “specific teachers were frequently mentioned by those women as inspiring” (p. 9). They saw school as a place where they could find women role models through those relationships. Several interviewees went so far as to mention that school was the place they felt valued if they could not receive that safety at home. Rimm et al. (1999) hypothesized that those women were successful because of the relationships that were established with an adult at school.

Regardless of the population or age group, authentic relationships built by teachers with students were recognized by students as important. Many students were able to reflect on what those relationships entailed and how they were served by them.

Teachers also saw the significance of committing time to the building of relationships. Once they began reflecting, they recognized what drove the relationships and what that looked like.

Antrop-Gonzales and de Jesus (2006) also interviewed and observed teachers in their study on community-based high schools. Teachers were just as willing to describe their relationships with students and what was entailed in those relationships that built success. The teachers and staff “value high quality interpersonal relationships and high expectations, while providing support and engaging students in the learning process in ways that led to reported academic success” (p. 411). The coupling of relationships with high expectations was seen as a precursor to success in the classroom and the community. Teachers reiterated several times that there was more to the relationships with students than just caring for them; there had to be expectations and support for academics also.

In her overview of teacher efficacy, Collier (2005) discussed the need for teachers to focus on relationship building to improve classroom pedagogy. She saw such work as a base to increased engagement from students, citing that “most often teachers work to develop caring relationships in their practice because they know a student is less likely to commit to the instructional program if the student does not believe the teacher is personally interested and emotionally invested in the success of that student” (p. 355). Building and maintaining the teacher-student relationship benefitted the student, and also helped the teacher with classroom management and efficacy in the classroom.

Teachers, however, saw their role changing in the classroom to include the various and diverse needs of students. Hargreaves (1994) outlined the changing aspects in teaching in his study of primary schools in London. Teachers discussed the need to

include relationship building in the classroom before teaching could begin. One participant noted that “there’s so much more social work involved in your job now than there ever was before. So many problems, behavioral and social problems, that are sitting in your classroom that have to be dealt with before you can even attempt to start teaching” (p. 123). The needs of each student must have been met in order for healthy, active learning to occur. Hargreaves’ teachers recognized the importance of the relationships and the two aspects of continuity and quality in those relationships.

Hebson, Earnshaw, and Marchington (2007) went further with teachers’ needs and explored emotional work and capability with teachers who had been questioned as to their extensive emotional work in classroom. All teachers argued that they must invest emotionally and that “capability could be demonstrated through the relationships they established within the classroom with pupils. The relationships they had built up with children were central to their identity as a teacher” (p. 685). The relationships were not a separate part of their teaching identity, but rather inextricably intertwined with everything they did in the classroom.

Teacher discussions of relationships embodied the themes of Torey Hayden’s writings, as Marlowe (2006) described. As a classroom instructor, Hayden saw the implications of the relationships and that “relationships were built on actions—specific helping behaviors that create powerful change” (p. 96). It was not simply caring for the student, but acting on that care that caused change with the students. Through her stories about action she “give[s] special voice to the power of emotion, intuition, and relationships in human lives and emphasize[s] the synergistic power of relationships

between a teacher and her students” (p.94). The relationships drove everything in Hayden’s classrooms and in her writings.

Noddings (2003) focused on defining the caring relationship in the classroom. As a classroom teacher herself, she described the way she perceived teacher-student relationships. She saw the student as the focus, not the curriculum, noting that “he (the student) must be aware that for me he is more important, more valuable, than the subject” (p. 174). Students mattered the most in her classes, and she recognized that she must be available to all students. This was despite her understanding of the burden this entails for teachers, saying, “I do not need to establish a deep, lasting, time-consuming personal relationships with every student. What I must do is to be totally and nonselectively (sic) present to the student—to each student—as he addresses me” (p.180). It was the attention given to the student that mattered to Noddings, not the lasting relationship.

Listening was the focus of the Shultz’s (2003) research that encompassed several school settings, including elementary, middle, and high schools. Through her conversations with teachers she discovered that time was a roadblock to establishing relationships with students. She noted that the teachers who had positive relationships with students had to find “frequent times to interact with students individually about academic and social issues” (p. 2). Teachers recognized that time had to be set aside to genuinely listen to students in order to improve their teaching.

Interviews with teachers continued to give a wealth of information regarding student relationships. Strahan and Layell (2006) interviewed a team of teachers at a middle school throughout a whole semester of classes. Their research led to the theme that “teachers insisted that the most important factor in creating a supportive climate was

understanding their students and establishing caring relationships with them” (p. 150).

Regardless of the curriculum, the schedule, class sizes, and many other factors, teachers continued to state that the relationships were the key to student success.

Teacher interviews at two alternative high schools drew TeRiele (2006) to conclude that the need for a caring relationship involved not just knowing students but also included the emotional aspect of teaching. She found that “successful teaching and learning in these (alternative) settings relied on a recognition of teaching as a caring profession and of the emotional dimension of schooling—both in the relationship of individual teachers with students and in the culture of the school as a whole” (p. 63). The relationships moved beyond simply individual teacher-student interactions to the matter of establishing a school building that embodied the culture of caring, leading to the success of the students enrolled.

Noddings (2005a) continued her discussion of the caring ethic in school after her initial research. As she researched the literature on caring in schools, she saw that following the curriculum and caring can go hand in hand. She recognized that there were teachers who could do both. She stated: “Some sensitive teachers manage to teach the standard curriculum to students whom others would find impossible to teach. Some abandon the standard curriculum to teach lessons about life and relationships. Some act effectively as social workers. Some act almost as parents” (p. 152). The most successful teachers found ways to merge all the roles in their classroom in order to fulfill the needs of students.

Four decades of teachers echoed the sentiment of caring inSizer and Sizer (1999), showing that the idea of building personal relationships with students was not a new

concept, but one that skilled teachers have used for generations. Through observations with hundred of teachers, Sizer, et.al, found that “the best way to motivate the student to do his work in his class would be to have personal credibility with each one of them: Not only now, but next week, next month; not only with those that are doing well, but with those who, for a variety of reasons, are doing badly” (p.113). It was not the short-term, crisis intervention concept that worked with students, but the long-term caring through the ups and downs of a school year or time in a building that motivated students to be successful.

As Valenzuela (1999) continued her research in Texas schools, she saw teachers reiterating the theme set by students regarding relationships. However, she also saw that teachers often described the relationship differently, when more caring about the students was needed instead of just about completing the academics. She recognized that “teachers demand caring about school in absence of relation; students view caring, or reciprocal relations as the basis for all learning” (p. 79). As teachers stumbled onto this theory, caring moved beyond classroom work into students’ personal and social lives.

Through open-ended questionnaires, Korkmaz (2007) found that teachers who had the most academic success with students were those who established and maintained relationships with students. Korkmaz saw that successful teachers “know their students both formally and informally” (p. 396) and added to the educational environment through these relationships.

Rimm, Rimm-Kauffman, and Rimm (1999) also considered teachers’ opinions on relationships regarding young women who became successful adults. Teachers were not allowed to ignore the emotional aspect of the classroom, according to these adult women.

They often spoke of teachers who inspired them. The teachers that were especially important were those who could not “ignore the fact that emotional relations with others are the first source for self-development” (p. 933). The girls ended up with successful lives and careers because an adult, usually a teacher, showed interest in their talents and lives.

Students and teachers alike noted the importance of relationships in the classroom and the school. However, there continued to be a question as to what the student-teacher relationships involved. Even though there were many definitions, several researchers addressed the idea of establishing a definition for what relationships involved (Antrop-Gonzales, et al., 2006; Brendto et al., 2002; Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Miller & Pedro, 2006; Mirsky, 2007; Noddings, 2003; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Schussler et al., 2006; Shultz, 2003; Stipek, 2006; Strahan et al., 2006). There were specific structures in teacher-student relationships that may have led to success for students.

Antrop-Gonzales (2006) found that simply saying a relationship was established was not enough to motivate students. There had to be the practice of hard caring, which was described as “a form of caring characterized by supportive instrumental relationships and high academic expectations” (p. 413). It was not merely the act of caring, but having expectations for students and giving the support needed to succeed.

Similarly, more than just the relationship between the individual teacher and student mattered to the student. Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons (2006) included class unity in their research. Teachers interviewed saw the need for a student to belong that stretched to “generating a sense of community, in integrating personal connections and

professional connections between the teacher and pupil” (p. 604). Community building was a part of the relationship in the classroom and outside of the school.

Miller and Pedro (2006) recognized that the need to foster relationships with students must often be taught to pre-service teachers. They saw safety of students as the most important aspect of the teacher-student relationship. It rang true that “students who do not feel safe and valued will find it impossible to focus on academics or relationships with others” (294). Pre-service teachers discussed these points to prepare for their upcoming positions. Without creating an environment of safety and feeling valued, Miller and Pedro did not see teachers being successful.

The interviews and writings of both teachers and students in Rodgers and Raider-Roth’s (2006) research outlined several definitions of the relationships teachers could establish in classrooms. First and foremost, they stated that it “involves self-knowledge, trust, relationship and compassion” (p. 266) to connect to students. This meant that teachers must be ready to use mental, physical, and emotional faculties to engage students. They also saw the relationships as two-sided, including requiring “a feedback loop, where teachers can take action, can watch how students respond and can be moved and changed by these responses, thereby shaping their next caring act” (p. 276). These skills required being aware of students and genuinely listening to what they said and how they responded in the classroom.

Schussler and Collins (2006) found specific characteristic of positive student-teacher relationships when interviewing teachers and students. Most prominent were five features including “opportunity for success, flexibility, respect for students, family atmosphere, and sense of belonging” (p. 1469). They believed a teacher could foster and

model all of these in a classroom by “forging a personal connection with students” (p. 1471).

Schultz (2003), however, claimed that there was no recipe for successful relationships with students. She noted that “teachers must go beyond the scripts they are handed to learn about what students are and what they care about” (p. 104). The notion was that each individual teacher must learn how to form their own relationships in their own ways with a diverse group of students.

The idea that teachers must find their own way with relationships was echoed by Brendt, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern (2002). They did not provide a step-by-step method to build relationships, but noted that “the quality of human relationships in schools and youth services programs may be more influential than the specific techniques of interventions employed” (p. 81). The assertion here was that it was not the ‘how’ that matters, but the ‘what’. Each teacher was encouraged to learn how they built relationships and continued to work on what was effective for individual students.

There were some modes of behavior outlined by Stipek (2006), however, conducive to positive relationships. When focusing on young children’s behaviors that promoted relationships, factors included “listening to their concerns, responding to transgressions gently and with explanations rather than sharply and with punishment” (p. 46). These skills could be used as a springboard to building and maintaining relationships with students.

Mirksy (2007) agreed that what teachers did to establish relationships was less important than that they made it imperative to do so. She advocated engaging students through “doing things WITH them, rather than TO them or FOR them” (p. 5). She did not

give specific strategies because she recognized that the strategies would need to be different with each individual student.

Research showed that building relationships was especially vital in educating difficult and/or at-risk students (Brendto et al., 2002; Ruus et al., 2007; Stipek, 2006; Thompson, 2008; Walsh, 2006). Without a connection, many of those students were at risk of dropping out of school or having juvenile court involvement. Teachers who believed in relationship building had a chance to enact change with these students.

Relationships with teachers could affect behavior in the classroom. Thompson (2008) gathered data from students in a low performing high school and discovered the impact of relationships. Thompson noted that “starting in elementary school, the quality of students’ relationships with their teachers can strongly influence their behavior and their perceptions of school” (p. 50). Students who felt as though they were cared for, no matter what their background and experiences in school, could build resiliency to help them remain in school.

Teachers may have found difficult and at-risk students who pushed away when they tried to establish a relationship. In working with pre-service teachers using vignettes and reflections, Walsh (2006) discovered a fear of students who were difficult. However, she pointed out that “understanding the biggest developmental picture and recognizing that often the most unloveable students are the ones who need the most love helps teachers to recognize the importance of maintaining relationships despite antagonism and apathy” (p.12). Through whole-class research regarding the at-risk student, pre-service teachers were taught to discover the needs of those students.

Brendto et al., (2002) focused their research on students at risk and saw the advantages of a strong personal connection with a teacher. Often, those students distrusted adults and became referred to as “relationship-resistant, viewing even friendly, helpful adults with deep distrust” (p. 9). They saw this distrust grow the older students became, stating: “at each progressive level of the education system, relationships increasingly lack meaning and personal satisfaction. Not surprisingly, students at greatest risk of dropping out of school are those who have never been friends with any teacher” (p. 13). The researchers called for action to renew ties with students who were especially at risk of dropping out.

Students who had academic difficulties also needed a relationship with teachers, as discussed by Stipek (2006). She noted that “schools should take particular care to promote good relationships with the students who are at most risk academically” (p. 48). Going beyond just at-risk students, there was an indication that academic success depended on the relationships. Stipek noted that failures may have been due to class relations, saying “students who are struggling academically typically have the worst relationships with their teachers. Teachers need to make special efforts to show a personal interest in and interact positively with the students whom they find most difficult to teach” (p. 49). Although this could be viewed as an extra burden to the teacher, it may have been what was most needed by academically struggling students.

In the research by Ruus et al. (2007), relationships were the largest predictor of whether a student finished high school. The researchers discovered the “best predictor of [dropouts] was teacher’s relationship style with the student whereas the weakest predictor

was order/discipline” (p. 929). Hence, it was not classroom management that made the difference, but the time the teacher took to build and maintain relationships with students.

There were some significant barriers to student-teacher relationships, including critics, institutional rules, and public opinion. The system of schooling was not always prepared to discuss or change their practices, and researchers have shown the resistance in their data (Brendto et al., 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Noddings, 2005b; Shultz, 2003; Sizer & Sizer, 1999). The arguments against building relationships with students must also be addressed in order to enact change to help students be successful.

The institution of education in general was seen as a problem in Hargreaves’ (1994) research. The structure and schedule may not have been conducive to the time needed to work on relationships. A large number of schools “seem to mesh poorly with the academic, personal and social needs of their students” (p. 28). Teachers interviewed were crying out for time to meet with students, and they were often denied that time.

There were very few resources available to help teachers learn how to interact with students from various and different backgrounds. When Shultz (2003) gathered teachers to discuss listening, she frequently heard from them the disappointment of not being able to meet the needs of students who were from very different backgrounds. She was left asking, “[H]ow do we blend different voices to form authentic relationships which will enable urban public school students to succeed?” (p. 167). The frustration expressed by teachers was valid when they may not have had much in common with their students.

It was found that a significant portion of educators feared losing power in the classroom by having relationships with students. Brendto et al. (2002) argued that this

was not the case and that students must feel connected to their teachers. They stated: “[T]he most potent behavior influence that an adult can have in the life of a child comes when an attachment has been formed. Adults who fear that strong relationships will lessen their authority with youth are misinformed” (p. 74). These finding confirmed the belief that the primary issue was not students who needed to know what the relationship could do, but that teachers were resistant to building relationships.

Noddings (2005b) also addressed the question of the power held by the teacher in a relationship with students. She noted that it was not an equal relationship and that in “these relations, one person occupies the position of carer more of the time, and the other is necessarily the cared-for. Some familiar examples are parent-child, teacher-student, and professional-client relations” (p. 91). The relationships teachers had with students would always be unequal and it was the responsibility of the adult teacher to maintain that balance. She recognized that the adults’ fear of losing authority in the attempt to find such middle ground in an appropriate relationship often kept them from even attempting to form such relationships.

The need to balance relationships was often the first argument offered by teachers who were reluctant to form relationships with students. Sizer and Sizer (1999) questioned what the relationship could become and where appropriate boundaries should be drawn. “How close should students and teachers be? If students confide in their teachers, are there areas which should be off-limits such as criticizing the teacher’s colleagues? When teachers and students grow fond of each other, is the teacher’s judgment impaired? What are the necessary boundaries of the relationship?” (p. 87). Such questions represented persistent concerns and were voiced by many teachers involved in the research.

Caring

Research centered frequently on what caring teachers actually did in the classroom and the hallways to show students that they had a genuine concern for both their education and personal lives. The characteristics were sometimes unclear, but there was a significant group of attributes that the caring teachers shared (Antrop-Gonzlaes & de Jesus, 2006; Collier, 2005; Hargreaves, 1994; Hebson et al., 2007; Herman & Marlowe, 2005; Marlow, 2006; Noddings, 2003; Noddings, 2005b; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Schussler & Collins, 2006; Stipek, 2006; Strahan & Layell, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). Through discussions with teachers and students, various methods for teachers to demonstrate care were made evident.

Unfortunately, many found that there were very few clear strategies regarding caring to share with their peers. Hargreaves (1994) noted that there were “no commonly understood criteria for acceptable care or appropriate care” (p. 148). Antrop-Gonzles and de Jesus (2006) echoed this, saying, “caring, however is an ambiguous term that means different things to different theorists and is often interpreted through culturally, racially and gender-biases lenses” (p.411). Hebson (2007) continued to struggle, seeing the “difficulty of measuring the caring and emotional aspect of teachers’ work” (p. 676). Researchers continued to search for the formula for a caring teacher, but it was the discussions with teachers that showed how each individual showed caring in the school setting.

The first characteristic found by Noddings (2005b) was that the caring teacher “will not permit cruelty, sarcasm, ridicule, brainwashing, or gross incompetence of any sort” (p. xviii). In a caring classroom, all encounters with students were to be positive.

Noddings saw the imperative for caring as one of “moral orientation” (p.22), with every effort made to maintain a connection between student and teacher, with both needing the relationships. Students and teachers needed each other – “Students need competent adults to care; teachers need students to respond to their caring”(p. 69), and relationships are the goal of all classroom encounters.

In later work, Noddings (2005b) expanded the definition of caring, describing it as “a state of mental suffering or of engrossment: to care is to be in a burdened mental state, one of anxiety, fear or solitude about something or someone” (p. 9). This definition added more responsibility to the role of the teacher, requiring that the “student is infinitely more important than the subject” (20). Noddings’s definition asked that the teacher focus first on the student, and that the curriculum occupy a position of only secondary importance.

Although care could be difficult to explain and, as Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) noted, also difficult to quantify, whether or not teachers knew how to care became the primary concern. Teachers and other educators may have realized that care was important, but they found that “the assumption is that teachers and schools know how to be caring” (p. 1463). Teachers did not echo this sentiment, calling for more training on how to show care in the school. Teachers who exhibited caring did so innately, demonstrating that “being deliberate about caring for each other appears to be embedded in the daily interactions and the mindsets” (p. 1480) instead of being learned behaviors.

Not accepting a negative environment was a common theme in the research. Herman & Marlowe (2005) discussed the role of the servant leader who would “make caring the expectation, creating zero tolerance of put-downs, and making cruel actions

unacceptable” (p. 178). Not only did students feel safe in this setting, but teachers were able to model what caring behaviors appeared to be.

In agreement with the importance of caring in the classroom, Valenzuela (1999), when discussing caring with students and teachers, recognized that caring must be a part of the culture. “The first and arguably the most important step is to introduce a culture of authentic caring that incorporates all members of the school community as valued and respected partners in education” (p. 99). Without this step, no one interviewed by Valenzuela saw education as having the potential to be successful. She continued to ask what authentic caring was, finding that there was a loose definition that embodied “the essential elements of authentic caring: connection, unconditional love, and a comprehensive apprehending of ‘the other’” (p. 157) leading to more concrete examples of what caring could do in the classroom.

However, Stipek (2006) moved past the initial relationships to find a characteristic that changed the relationship. It was not just about letting the student know that the teacher cared. The definition was further expanded by noting that “being a caring and supportive teacher does not mean coddling; rather, it means holding students accountable while providing the support they need to succeed” (p. 47). This required that the student also be held to high standards and that the teacher went beyond the caring seen in a surface relationship.

Antrop-Gonzales and de Jesus (2006) spent time looking at how students saw caring teachers and again noted the focus on expectations to be successful. The students “did not describe caring ambiguously; rather they linked it directly to facilitators’ insistence on their academic success and the support they provided to this end” (p. 424).

It was not just the care for students, but how that caring focused the students academically. Many students explained that caring teachers “emphasized the importance of close student-teacher relationships and hold students to high academic expectations” (p. 423). This is very different from what Antrop-Gonzales and de Jesus described as “soft caring,” which is “characterized by a teacher’s feeling sorry for a student’s circumstances and lowering his/her expectations” (p. 411). Students did not feel truly cared for by teachers who showed soft caring.

Collier (2005) outlined some significant characteristics of the caring teacher. She noted that the caring teacher must “practice listening to children with attention and respect” and the caring environment should “value children,” allow children to “develop a sense of their own competency,” and encourage “students to practice freedom with responsibility” (p. 355-356). Collier also noted that the teacher must be committed to students, accepting “responsibility for the student performance whether it involves success or failure” (p. 353). Again, caring called for action beyond concern for students.

Through looking at Torey Hayden’s work, Marlowe (2006) listed various aspects of the caring teacher and the caring classroom. These included basic concepts such as ““be there, talking, sensitivity, acting in the best interest of others, caring as a feeling, caring as doing, and reciprocity” (p. 94). The framework included in this work focused on “being physically present and emotionally available when needed” (p. 95). Although this was a loose definition, Marlowe used specific incidents to exemplify those characteristics.

Strahan and Layell (2006) focused on one middle school team and how caring affected their instructional practices and was a springboard to learning. In their interviews

they saw that “successful teachers connected caring and action through specific instructional practices” (p. 148). The commitment to caring came through “attempts to get to know their students [that] better enabled them to create more engaging lessons” (p. 150). The difference made by knowing students well enough to know what they needed instructionally helped teachers engage students who felt disconnected from the learning process.

It was difficult to gauge what caring was, and even more so with students who were completely disengaged, feeling no one cared for them. Research with students showed that those who were not connected to teachers tended not to care about their scholastic performance (Antrop-Gonzales & de Jesus, 2006; Day, Kington, Stobart, & Sammons, 2006; Noddings, 2003, 2005b; Orenstein, 1994; Thompson, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999; Walsh, 2006). These were the students who most needed a caring adult at school but had not made the connection.

Noddings (2005b) considered valid the claims of students who said they did not care about school because “no matter how hard teachers try to, if the caring is not received by students, they claim ‘they don’t care’” (p. 15). Teachers Noddings interviewed claimed to care, but were nevertheless “unable to make the connections that would complete caring relations with their students” (p. 2). The students were failing to “respond to their teachers’ efforts ... but if teachers behave in unfamiliar ways, students may have difficulty detecting attempts to care” (p.107). The study hence found evidence of a disconnection between the teachers’ beliefs and the needs of students.

Orenstein (1994) echoed the notion that students knew when a teacher cared about them, saying “just as the children know who ‘don’t care’, they also know who does” (p.

145). Various examples were given in her research regarding students who knew what they needed and were crying out for someone to at least show an effort. No specific techniques were described for difficult students, but one student claimed that she “just needed someone to be there for her when she falls, to pick her up, push her back out there and tell her she can do it. Someone to be there when she’s in need” (p. 192). Although she was a struggling, at-risk student, she knew that she could not function alone without that caring adult.

The connection with teachers was also difficult for minority students, as researched by Thompson (2008). The students she surveyed in a low-performing, high minority high school showed that they felt teachers did not care for them. Sadly, “only 6 percent, overall agreed that ‘Most of my teachers care about me.’ Black students (56 percent) and Latino students (57 percent) were less likely than white students (70 percent) to say that most of their teachers cared about them” (p. 51). Thompson indicated that some of these results revealed that teachers may have had some discomfort with students from different cultures and backgrounds. However, in the surveys, students noted that they only needed teachers to pay attention to them in order to show they cared.

In agreement with Noddings (2005b), Valenzuela (1999) saw well-intentioned teachers who realized that there was “a mutual misunderstanding of what it means to ‘care about’ school” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 21-22). Teachers of difficult students did not always recognize that an “obvious limit to caring exists when teachers ask all students to care about school while many students ask to be caring for *before* they care about. With students and school officials talking past each other, a mutual sense of alienation evolves” (p. 24). Valenzuela saw the students pushing back against the idea that they

must care about school when they did not feel accepted in the setting. This concept led to a barrier against being successful at school.

Mistrust between difficult students and teachers was found in the research by Antrop-Gonzales & de Jesus (2006). Not only did the students not attain academic success, but significant “conflict and power struggles between teachers and students who see each other as not caring” (p. 412) also developed. Teachers became as jaded as students when they tried to engage individuals.

Day (2006) pushed farther than just the lack of caring in her research. Interviews with teachers revealed “tensions and contradictions in the primary teacher’s role, which are principally produced through the opposition between the impulse and requirement to ‘care and nurture’ and the requirement to control, manage and teach children in a group, meet externally established ‘standards’, and to deliver a curriculum” (p. 605). Essentially, the teachers did not know what their focus should have been when they were being pulled in different directions with students. It was not clear what the primary focus should have been, let alone how it could be accomplished.

The most difficult students may have been those most in need, but they also challenged teachers who may not have known where to begin caring for them. Noddings (2003) pointed to the teachers’ frustration with students when “the student rarely responds, is negative, denies the effort at caring” (p. 181). The teachers were just as prone to saying they did not care and could not figure out how to engage the difficult student.

Walsh (2006) was able to give one piece of advice, as detailed by middle school teachers in her research. The accomplished teachers interviewed saw the solution as

simply continuing to care, which Walsh describes as “one of the most powerful (and difficult) ways to reach the ‘I Don’t Care student’” (p. 11). The teachers advocated this method as continuing to “still hold out hope ... showing positive regard for students in the midst of challenging confrontation” (p. 14). Again, however, this represents insufficient concrete guidance for teachers in dealing with the students who need them the most.

Teacher Beliefs, Behaviors and Emotions

Teachers beliefs’ about their careers, school buildings, and students highly affected how they taught and interacted with students (Brendto et al.; 2002; Collier, 2005; Cook-Sather, 2006; Day et al., 2006; Evans, 1998; Giovannelli, 2003; Hargreaves, 1994; Herman & Marlowe, 2005; Hines & Paulson, 2006; Miller & Pedro, 2006; Noddings, 2003; Orenstein, 1994; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Russ et al., 2007; Schultz, 2003; Sizer & Sizer, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999; Walsh, 2006). Teachers were as much in control of their behavior as students. Collier (2005) noted that the “personal belief systems of teachers significantly influence the behaviors displayed in the classroom” (p. 351) and indicated that teacher beliefs could guide classroom management. Hines and Paulson (2006) continued this theme by saying: “teaching experiences that lead to more ingrained beliefs regarding difficulty during the adolescent period might be expected to contribute to middle school and high school teachers’ belief that they are less able to assist each individual student, thereby demonstrating controlling interactions” (p. 601). Once teachers believed certain things about students, it was difficult to change opinions and habits. These habits then led to culture, and Brendto et al. (2002) discussed that “negative

attitudes toward difficult youth are deeply embedded in the cultural milieu” (p. 18). All three sources focused on the fact that teachers’ beliefs dictated their actions.

Although these accounts of teachers’ beliefs hinged on negative perceptions, there were many accounts in the research of teachers who continued to believe in students and education. The teachers interviewed by Cook-Sather (2006) saw hope in their students. One teacher noted: “I’m going to listen to them because they are extremely articulate, extremely intelligent, they know what’s wrong with school, they know what’s missing, and they’re constantly asking for it” (p. 350). The teachers’ beliefs in students led to further insight and better relationships. Another teacher said that believing in students “helped me to realize that I need student input and energy in order to sustain myself as an energetic and passionate teacher” (p. 352). There was not a negative slant on any of the students’ characteristics.

Day et al. (2006) also talked to teachers who exhibited positive beliefs about education and students. There was an elevated sense of power, in contrast to the helplessness seen in other narratives. Teachers showed “hope, too, because of the high levels of commitment and agency, often against the odds” (p. 614). There was a drive to move forward with students in her research.

Many of the positive beliefs of teachers in the research originated with communicating and getting to know students. Noddings (2003) saw dialogue with students as a part of the day where a teacher could be “rewarded not only with appreciation but also with all sorts of information and insights” (p. 52). There was a reward to believing in students and it did travel to the classroom. In the classroom, believing in students may even have led to teachers changing their behavior. One teacher

noted in the study that “she is not content to enforce the rules—and may even refuse occasionally to do so” (p. 178) for the good of her students. Such positive regard for students made the teacher do what was right for each individual student.

Knowing the students and believing in their abilities was the focus of Shultz’s (2003) study and dialogue centered on authentic listening. She found that “learning to teach involves more than mastering a set of skills” (p.4) and pointed to the importance of knowing and listening to each student. She went as far as to point out that it “is incumbent on teachers to learn who their students are and tailor the teaching to those students” (p.171). Through dialogue with teachers who were doing this, her research recognized that teaching is not just about the assessment of academic skills.

Reflecting on practices and relationships with students became important points in the research of Giovannelli (2003) and Rodgers & Raider-Roth (2006). Giovannelli talked to various effective teachers and saw that “the greater the reflective disposition, the more effective teacher behavior” (p. 300). There was even a “small, but statistically significant” (p. 301) relationship between reflecting on beliefs and behaviors and academic achievement. Rodgers & Raider-Roth (2006) noted the importance of teachers’ experience, along with reflection on teaching, which led to a teacher having a stronger presence in the classroom.

There were various behaviors that teachers saw themselves using in class and with students that helped connect them with students. Researchers focused on these behaviors as opening the door to understanding students and their needs (Antrop-Gonzales & de Jesus, 2006; Hargreaves, 1994; Korkmaz, 2007; Mirsky, 2007; Noddings, 2005b; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006; Schussler & Collins, 2006; Shultz, 2003; Stipek, 2006;

Sullivan, Tobias, & McDonough, 2006; and Walsh, 2006). When students were presented with these behaviors, they responded positively and were engaged in classes.

Listening was a top behavior of teachers to facilitate a relationship with students. Antrop-Gonzales and de Jesus (2006) saw that “students responded that facilitators and administrators were accessible, listened to them and were willing to invest time with them to support them academically or with other concerns” (p. 424), leading to more positive relationships. It was important to point out that both academic and social concerns were part of the relationships teachers built with students through listening.

Walsh (2006) also noted the importance of listening to the needs of students in order to facilitate success. This incorporated “paying attention to areas of interest, emotional states, frustration levels and behavior” (p. 11). This careful attention gave teachers access to the world of the student. This included teachers taking the time to “listen to student perspectives and negotiate mutually satisfactory solutions” (p. 11). Once teachers began listening, they were able to work with students on a higher level.

Shultz (2003) continued the discussion of the importance of listening to students, noting that “teachers can find moments in the day to listen carefully to students to guide their teaching” (p. 15). However, in discussions with teachers, there was another aspect that Shultz discovered that led to authentic listening. Teachers must have taken risks to connect with students and this kind of teaching required that teachers “make ourselves vulnerable” (p. 169) and relinquished some control in the classroom.

Teachers who fostered successful interpersonal relationships with students made a point to also hold those students to a high level of expectations toward success. Schussler

& Collins (2006) saw that there was a “delicate balance that teachers must achieve between acting as a friend and catering to students’ personal needs, and acting as an authority figure and maintaining high expectations” (p. 1475-1476). By holding high expectations, students saw that the caring was not just about the child, but also about educational achievement. The teachers also noted that they “were flexible to ensure that students understood the material” (p. 1472) although they kept the expectations and goals for students steady regardless of the student. Knowing each student individually and assessing needs helped the teachers in the study adapt the learning process to meet the needs of students.

Stipek (2006) saw a need for teachers to move past looking merely at test scores and skills that are tested to engage students when discussing high expectations. It is noted that “holding students accountable without this support and encouragement is likely to discourage and alienate them rather than motivate them” (p. 48). Although teachers were required to cover the content and expected their students to work hard, there was a concern that this method left teachers “less time to engage students in conversation about personal issues or make them feel valued and supported” (p. 46). The key was to couple the two methods to engage students fully.

Education then became more than imparting content and involved connecting with the whole child. Hargreaves (1994) saw teachers who recognized the need to educate “young people in skills and qualities like adaptability, responsibility, flexibility and capacity to work with others [as] important goals for teachers and school in a post-industrial society” (p. 50). The social goals of the classroom became just as important as academic goals. The welfare of the students was paired with the performance in

academics and the two could not be separated, in the views expressed by teachers interviewed by Hargreaves (1994).

The passion for teaching and students played a significant role in establishing relationships with students. Passion was difficult to measure, as seen by Rodgers & Raider-Roth (2006). They pointed out that many of us “have come across a teacher who, with the metaphorical touch of a finger, could give us exactly what we need, neither more nor less, exactly when we needed it” (p. 267). It was this passion for work and the classroom that many successful teachers pointed to as a contributing factor. This passion led to what Rodgers & Raider-Roth (2006) referred to as presence or “a state of alert awareness, receptivity and connectedness to the mental, emotional and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step” (p. 266). The passion expressed by teachers with presence was not just about the subject taught, but “for the human endeavor of learning itself” (p. 271). Although not a skill taught in pre-service education programs, passion moved teachers to connect with students.

The downfall in asking teachers to be passionate and connect to students beyond the curriculum was the lack of time to do so. Shultz (2003) recognized that this kind of teaching “requires a teacher to listen to the classroom as a group, to pay attention to how individuals are interacting with and within the group, and to teach students to listen to each other” (p. 40). However, there were significant barriers to teaching from this standpoint. Shultz found that teachers “frequently have little or no time to learn about students’ lives outside of school” (p. 103) and had difficulty finding time in the classroom to learn about students.

The emotions of teachers also played a part in how well and what skills they used to build and maintain relationships with students. Researchers have noted that teachers use their emotions to drive their teaching (Hebson, Earnshaw, & Marchington, 2007; Mirsky, 2007; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). The emotional welfare of individual teachers could destroy or facilitate the relationships with students and many teachers recognized the need to take care of themselves in order to help students.

Hebson et al. (2007) saw difficulty in measuring the emotional aspects of teaching, yet also noted that “the emotional aspects of the job are vital” (p. 680). The teachers they interviewed struggled with the perception that “the technical aspects of teaching are prized over the emotional aspects” (p. 687). However, these teachers also “all based their teaching identities on philanthropic emotion-giving in the classroom” (p. 692). It was difficult for them to show their devotion just through the academic arena, and they wanted to be able to define what they give emotionally in the classroom.

The emotional security of teachers was found by Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) to be a frequent discussion item. Teachers interviewed noted that “they must stay connected with themselves and recognize the part of themselves that can short-circuit the connection” (p. 278) with students. They had to reflect on their own emotions in order to focus completely on students.

Mirsky (2007) interviewed teachers from an alternative school who “recognized that they had to take care of themselves as a team before they could help students” (p. 7) and saw a need to be self-disciplined in taking care of themselves and fellow teachers. Without fulfilling this need, they often saw themselves falling into the trap of “simply blaming kids for problems” (p. 11) instead of owning their own emotions.

Summary

There were many factors that led to or destroyed student-teacher relationships. First and foremost, there was a gap between how relationships were defined, both by students and teachers. Students felt they had very different needs than some teachers recognized or acknowledged. There were problems defining relationships because it was not an aspect of the classroom that was easy to measure. Much of the research was centered on the qualitative stories of teachers and students. The vocabulary with which to define relationships was broad and divergent, leading to confusion about what a teacher-student relationship involved and how it could aid learning, in both the academic and social arenas.

Much of the base of student-teacher relationships involved the idea of caring, which is also broadly defined by various sources. Teachers were struggling to reach students who exhibited an attitude of not caring, but found little help in defining what practices caring teachers adopted and what aspects contributed to caring relationship. There were also significant risks of not receiving care, but there were questions regarding what care should come from the home and what could come from the school setting.

The behavior, emotions, and beliefs of teachers also played a role in student-teacher relationships. Regardless of what the research said about building and maintaining relationships, each individual teacher had their own ideas and beliefs about what allowed them to be successful with students. Also, there were significant barriers to having the time to reflect on teachers' own belief structures and visions of what a classroom with various levels and forms of relationships could or should be like.

The student-teacher relationship has been proven to be important in the classroom, but the focus has not generally been on middle schools, where students seemed to be the most at-risk and needed teachers to focus on their needs along with the curricular needs of the school. Also, much of the research centered on alternative school students and high school students who have not yet had the chance to feel cared about in schools. The need to focus on a group of teachers of varied backgrounds who were able to connect to students in a variety of ways was evident.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Behavior referrals from 7th graders in the 2007-2008 school year were analyzed to determine which 16 students, eight boys and eight girls, were most at-risk due to their behaviors. Although not all of those students were still at the same middle school due to the transitory nature of the families, those that remained in the cohort of those receiving referrals were used as a model of reflection for teachers.

Eight 8th grade team teachers were interviewed with semi-structured questions for the beginning of this study. The teachers ranged from first-year teachers to 20-year veterans in the same building. All teachers were on the 8th grade team and taught in core subject areas required for all students to complete before moving to the high school building. Five women and three men were interviewed. The interview questions aimed to discover how each teacher viewed students in the classroom and how he/she interacted with students in the school building.

Lastly, interviews were conducted with two administrators, one from the building and one who was an intern in the building and was an administrator the following year. The questions for the interviews were semi-structured and administrators were encouraged to add information they found pertinent when thinking about relationships between teachers and students. The goal of these interviews was to discover what administrators saw teachers doing in order to foster and maintain relationships with students in the building.

This qualitative study was designed to research interactions and views of 8th grade teachers in a Midwestern urban setting. Specifically, it studied how the methods used by teachers to interact with students affected how they performed in the classroom. The

methodology of this study included interviews with teachers, administrators, and review of student behavior referral information. The overall study was a case study of a specific group of people, 8th grade teachers in a Midwestern urban setting.

The focus of a case study is to “attempt to choose a piece that is a naturally existing unit” (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007, p. 61). The 8th grade team at the chosen middle school met twice a week to discuss the needs of students and curriculum. They shared common planning times and shared students. The team was not constructed for this study, but was a “collection of people who interact, who identify with each other and who share expectations about each others’ behaviors” (p. 61).

Each teacher was interviewed once during the fall semester of 2008. Interview questions were semi-structured and focused on the beliefs of each individual regarding student potential and attitudes. The interviews also probed for how teachers interacted with students who may have been perceived as behavior issues in the classroom and as at-risk of dropping out of high school. The interviews allowed for much interaction and were “flexible enough for the observer to note and collect data on unexpected dimensions of the topic” (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007, p. 79). The option for follow up interviews was available for clarification and as needed.

Administrators who interacted with 8th grade teachers and students were also interviewed. Interview questions were again semi-structured and focused on the aspects the administrators saw from 8th grade teachers when they interacted with 8th grade students. The interviews involved two separate administrators from the same middle school as the 8th grade teachers. A principal and an administrative intern were interviewed. The option for follow up interviews was available as needed.

Each interview was taped and transcribed after being reviewed by the researcher. The key to creating an environment conducive for open interviewing involved “asking appropriate questions and relying on participants to discuss the meaning of their experiences” (Creswell, 2007, p. 140). No questions were added in the initial interviews, but participants were encouraged to expound on some answers. The researcher probed further with questions by asking why and how after answers from the participants.

Participants

Eight 8th grade teachers in an urban middle school in the Midwest were the participants in this study. They had varied amounts of years of experience and all had different styles of teaching and interacting with students. They ranged from 23 to 50 years of age. The population included novice teachers and seasoned teachers who had experience in a middle school and/or high school setting.

All teachers volunteered to participate in the study and comprised the core subject area grade level team in the building. Teachers were selected on the basis of the population of students they served. Each teacher saw a variety of students from general education to special education in the building during their daily schedule. Each teacher served on a grade level team and all teachers of the 8th grade team were interviewed to obtain the full view of all 8th grade students. They came from different subject areas including mathematics, reading, social studies, science and special education. All teachers had a common planning time as well as an individual planning time. Teachers were chosen on the basis of the conversation they were able to have during a common planning time twice a week

The first participant (T1), a male civics teacher, had been teaching at the middle school for eight years. At the time, he had six class periods of civics, five of which were taught in conjunction with the special education teacher. One class period of the day was an enrichment class, which ran much like a study hall. He also coached high school baseball at the high school across the street from where he taught. This teacher also lived in the neighborhood of the school and had previously worked at the neighboring high school as a physical education associate and campus monitor.

The second participant (T2) taught 8th grade math in a co-teaching situation with a Title I teacher. She was the teachers' union representative for the building and had been teaching math in the building for 20 years. She was also the 8th grade team leader and served on the building leadership team. She and her family lived in the school neighborhood, but she chose to send her children to the magnet middle school in the area. It was widely known that she has good classroom management.

The third participant (T3), a reading teacher, was in her third year of teaching, all in the same building. She joined the 8th grade team in a remedial reading position during the year of the study. She previously taught special education reading in the 7th grade, and she did remain responsible for some special education students.

The fourth teacher (T4) was a second year teacher in the building. She was specifically assigned to special education, yet only had two classes designated for special education students. She co-taught the other periods with T1 in the civics classroom. She was also taking classes at the local university to obtain her special education endorsement. She coached high school softball during the summer at a neighboring private school. She was having her first child at the end of the school year.

The fifth participant (T5) was also a special education teacher who co-taught in a science classroom. He had one section of special education enrichment and one section of special education science. He had been teaching in the building for six years, the first assignment of his teaching career. He had previously taught special education science for two years in the building. He was also responsible for all the audiovisual equipment in the building. He coached boys' and girls' track in the building during the spring and helped with 8th grade boys' and girls' basketball during the year of the study.

The sixth participant (T6) was in her first year of teaching as a Title 1 math teacher. She co-taught with T2 and also had two enrichment classes. She had student taught in the same building the previous spring and was heavily recruited as a new teacher. She also taught summer school in the building between student teaching and the beginning of the school year. She commuted 30 miles each day from a neighboring community.

The seventh participant (T7) co-taught science with participant five. He had one section of advanced science and a section of enrichment. He had been teaching in the building for seven years, his first assignment. He was expecting a child the winter of the year of the study. He also coached boys' and girls' basketball with participant one. He coordinated gifted and talented programs in the building with outside staff members.

The eighth participant (T8) was a general education reading teacher. She had been in the building for six years, and this was her first teaching experience. She had previously co-taught and was in her first year of teaching alone in her classroom. She had three sections of blocked reading and languages arts, one of which was with advanced students.

All eight participants had been approached the previous school year by the researcher, who was an administrator in the building. All were willing to discuss their teaching styles and interactions with students in their classrooms. All had been told there was little to no job risk involved in this study because none of the participants were being evaluated by the researcher during the school year of the study. If any research extended into the following school year, the researcher would not be the evaluator of any of the participants. None of the teachers would receive compensation for their participation in the study. Participants were aware that information gathered could be used in building professional development at a later date, but that names and classrooms would remain confidential.

The participants were selected for various reasons. First, the group exhibited a wide range of degrees of experience, which would help determine if experience plays a role in how teachers interact with students, especially those with behavior referrals. There was also a wide range in the age of the teachers, from 23 to approximately 50 years of age. Each had had a different experience in their own middle school or junior high years, according to the generation to which they belonged. Each also grew up in a different community, ranging from very small, rural towns to urban areas.

Each of the participants had been observed by the researcher as part of her professional duties. Each had shown various and different ways of interacting with students. No method seemed to be proven to be correct, but some fostered strong relationships while others preferred to keep their distance from students' non-academic issues.

Two administrators had been chosen to be interviewed by the researcher. Both were employed by the same district as the teachers participating, and all were assigned to the same middle school as the teachers being studied. They would participate in semi-structured interviews. The intent was to gauge from the administrators what effective teachers did in the classroom and beyond to relate to 8th grade students. These discussions would also include behavioral information regarding the 8th grade teachers' classrooms. Follow up interviews would be conducted as needed.

The first administrator (A1) had been a teacher in the building being studied and was an administrative intern in the school. He had been teaching industrial technology in the building for seven years and had previously taught in Texas. He spent up to 15 hours a week performing administrative duties, including discipline, in the building. He was also a full-time administrator in the building the following school year.

The second administrator (A2) was the building principle of those teachers being studied. He had also been at the school for three years. He was previously a vice principle at a neighboring high school in the district. He had also worked in a neighboring district as an administrator, as a vice principle in the middle school being studied, and an elementary school teacher.

Design

The research done at this Midwest urban middle school was an ethnographic case study with a post-modern perspective. An ethnographic study attempts to “obtain a holistic picture of a particular society, group, institution, setting or situation” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2007, p. 511). Interviews and observations were the most appropriate tools to use in this ethnographic study. The product of an ethnography is a “holistic cultural portrait

of the group—a pulling together of everything he or she has learned about the group in all its complexity” (p. 512). The interviews in this study attempted to assess how 8th grade teachers perceived their students, the methods they used to connect with students in the classroom and what administrators saw as important skills when training teachers to be strong in relationship skills.

The research was also a case study because it “comprises just one individual, classroom, school, or program” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2007, p. 438). The researcher was studying just one school, not purporting to generalize the results to any other school. The administrators interviewed both worked at the same settings in the same neighborhood. The goal was to show what did and did not work in a specific school and grade level and what further training might be needed to aid teachers. Insights obtained through this research could then be used to help improve teaching in that specific school and schools with similar student populations.

The research also had a post-modern perspective because the researcher was not seeking a universal truth and recognized that “you can only know something from a certain position” (Bogdan & Bilken, 2007, p. 21). It was the experiences of the participants in the study that mattered. Their reality was what was being studied.

Instrumentation

Initial information regarding students with high numbers of behavior referrals to the office began the focus of this study. Those students who ranked in the top ten boys and girls receiving referrals from the 2007-2008 school year were determined through district and building information. The behavior referral information is listed in Appendix C. Those students still in attendance at the school for the 2008-2009 school year were

participants of the study and initially the focus of the teacher interview questions. The aim of the interviews was to determine what skills teachers used to connect to students who had a high number of behavior referrals and had been labeled at risk due to behavior in the classroom, as well as other students they considered to be at risk in their classrooms.

The goal of the interviews was to determine how teachers connected with students who had high behavior referrals the previous year and how prepared they were to build relationships with students. Teachers were given the opportunity to discuss methods they used to connect with the listed students and problems they may have had with those students in the classroom. Beyond classroom procedures and methods, the questions were meant to discuss what aspects of the students' behavior would detract from them being successful in high school and how middle school teachers could combat failure during the transition in 8th grade. The teacher participants did not know the students personally as 7th graders.

As the questionnaire was developed, it was deemed important to discuss the factors that could have been instrumental in students' lives, including family and minority status. Also, it was significant to determine what, if any, training teachers had received on building and maintaining relationships with students and whether they spent time reflecting on the skills they were using.

Two instruments were used to complete this study. Participants were interviewed initially for approximately one hour. They all responded to the same twelve interview questions. Those questions are found in Appendix A. The questions for the initial interviews focused on how the teachers viewed students in their classroom and what

methods they believed worked best for each of them in interacting with students in the classroom. The interviews were done in the teachers' classrooms. Each interview was taped and transcribed by the researcher after being reviewed. Through face-to face interview, the researcher was able also to take note of non-verbal communication such as facial expressions and body language.

There was no pilot testing with the interview questions, although many discussions around the topic had occurred with staff members before the study began. The questions were formed around those previous discussions, not only with participants, but with other building and district staff. The questions were also modeled around previous research and gaps in the literature. Those gaps included little information on what training teachers had in both pre-service work and through professional development in the realm of relationship building and connecting with students. Although the literature discussed the effects of such relationships, little information was found regarding the time allotted to teachers to develop such skills.

The use of interviews as a research method was decided on by way of a basic tenet of qualitative research. The goal was to gather as much information as possible about one phenomenon or case. The "backbone of qualitative research is extensive collection of data, typically from multiple sources of information" (Creswell, 2007, p. 43) and the interviews allowed the researcher to ask open-ended questions to elicit the greatest possible amount of information from participants.

After the initial interview and transcriptions, the researcher analyzed the materials for interview themes. The researcher searched specifically for information regarding teacher attitudes toward relationship building and reflection on student interactions.

There were also several subthemes. It became clear throughout the interviews that teachers did build relationships but did not have the time to spend on professional development discussing and honing those skills regarding individual students.

The researcher did not intend for the information gathered to be generalizable to another setting. However, the data from the interviews were considered reliable because they contained information drawn from “honest, believability, expertise, and integrity of the researcher” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 164). The researcher had been a part of the setting for three school years and such experience and study added to the reliability and validity of the interviews and information gathered.

Interviews of teachers were followed by interviews with administrators. These questions needed to be open-ended since such would make it easy to lead administrators to describe the ideal relationship between teachers and students without reflecting on why those relationships worked. The interviews with administrators lasted approximately one hour and were done in the office of the participant in order for the administrators to feel more comfortable with the participant.

The questions for administrator interviews were derived following several discussions among the administrative staff on relationships and the skills surrounding relationships. Through those discussions, the researcher noted that administrators gained much from focusing on relationship building and saw a benefit in teachers connecting with students. The administrative team had the power to build professional development around the needs of the teaching staff and students and, through open-ended questions, it was found that teaching was not just about pedagogy, but also about the effect a

relationships based teacher can have on student outcomes. The questions used in the interviews with administrators are included in Appendix B.

Discipline and behavior referral information enhanced the validity of the study by moving beyond the perceptions of the teachers and administrators to real-life interactions. The researcher was cognizant of her role in the observation and careful to note her own biases regarding students and teachers. However, the use of three data sources helped aid the “degree of confidence researchers can place in what they have seen or heard” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2007, p. 462).

Themes

Did teachers know they were fostering relationships during classroom instruction? Could teachers reflect on what specific skills they were using? Could the skills be transferred to others through conversation and dialogue in a professional development setting? Teachers and administrators helped answer these questions through their own dialogue in transcribed interviews.

Teacher interviews established five themes throughout the transcripts through coding and seeing repetition of topics. Those themes included: high behavioral referral students, methods used to connect to students, the direct use of relationship building as a tool, the role of the family communication, training available to teachers, and reflection on relationships. These themes were evident in all interviews with teachers.

Themes from teachers were discovered by the interviewer as transcripts were analyzed. Repetition of the themes was seen in each interview as teachers began reflecting more openly during the interviews. These themes were derived through analyzing the questions of the interviews and how they coincided with answers that were

repeated by teachers and administrators. Instrument questions did lead to the focusing on several themes and was done intentionally by the interviewer to glean the information for the study. The intention of the study was to discover how teachers perceived relationships with students, and the information gathered thus focused on relationships.

However, as the study developed, the themes that emerged alongside the importance of relationships were the role of the family and the training that was or was not provided as stated by all teachers interviewed. The researcher originally intended only to search for methods used; additional themes uncovered, however, led to further questions regarding teacher preparation and professional development.

Several themes were also present in the interviews conducted with the two administrators. These were more readily predicted by the researcher, due to her role in the building. Those themes included the importance of relationships, impediments to relationships, defining teaching interactions, opportunity provided for reflection, and advice administrators may have. These themes were aligned with the questions explicitly asked to administrators in the study and were readily seen while analyzing the transcripts of such interviews.

Procedures

Data were collected through interviews and behavior referrals in the study. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and tapes, electronic copies, and paper copies were in the possession of the researcher only. Behavior referral information was presented giving no private student information. All electronic copies were kept for two years on the researcher's personal computer, locked with a username and password. Paper copies were kept for two years in the researcher's home in a locked file cabinet.

Triangulation was very important in this qualitative study, as, in an ethnography, “it establishes the validity of an ethnographer’s observations” (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006, p. 520-521). Although information from the teachers was rich, it may not have captured the whole picture needed in an ethnographic study. Thus, the behavior referrals and interviews with administrators aided in making the study more reliable and valid.

This study was done in the fall and spring semesters of 2008-2009. All interviews with teachers were completed in the 2008-2009 school year. Behavior referral information was from the 2007-2008 school year. Teachers were given access to interview and theme information during the spring of 2009 and given the opportunity to respond and/or add information.

Data Analysis

The data gathered in the interviews were analyzed both descriptively and inductively. The researcher vividly described the setting and situation at the outset in order to paint a picture of the teachers and their classrooms. The researcher also coded information and gathered inductive data to build “patterns, categories, and themes from the ‘bottom up’, by organizing the data into increasingly more abstract units of information” (Creswell, 2007, p. 39). The researcher took a large number of themes and categorized them into three larger themes that emerged in the research.

These above methods were used in order to narrow the issues that affected teacher interactions with students in the classroom. Although there were many issues that emerged in the interviews and information from behavior referrals, only the larger issues could be addressed with the whole building staff.

Codification was used in the gathering and analysis of data. Code numbers were assigned for interviews with teachers one through eight and with administrators one and two. Administrators also received numbers in order to maintain confidentiality. Themes were coded with a T or A with the participant number following the letter. Themes were then grouped together as MT, or main theme. Each teacher and classroom was given as much anonymity as possible through the codification process to protect confidentiality.

Findings from the study were presented in a narrative form focusing on the themes that emerged through the interviews and classroom observations. Each teacher's story was told as well as the story of the 8th grade team and administrators that were interviewed. Then, the methods each teacher used to engage and interact with students were shown. Administrators described what they saw as successful interactions between teachers and students.

Chapter 4- Findings

Three data sources were analyzed to determine findings in the study. Behavior referrals from the 8th grade class from the previous year were narrowed to the most referred students for boys and girls. This gave teachers a focus when beginning to talk about students who were determined at risk in their classes. Teachers from the 8th grade team were interviewed regarding behavior in the classroom and how they built relationships with students. Finally, two administrators were interviewed to discuss the importance of relationship building of teachers and the opportunities in their building for teachers to do so. Summaries of individual information follow.

Behavior Referrals

Through the system-wide student information program, the students with the highest number of referrals from the previous school year were determined. This did not result in an even ten boys and ten girls because there were several male students who had four referrals for the year and female students who had two referrals for the year. Of the twelve girls identified, only eight were still at the current middle school, while of the twelve boys, only eight were still at the school. This was due to the large number of transient students in the school. Of the eight students who were no longer in attendance, four were still in the same district and four had moved to a different district.

Overall, few of the office referrals were for violent behavior and none were cause for recommendation for expulsion for any of the students. Each of the students identified was also seen as a disruption in the classroom on numerous occasions before receiving an office referral and the parent of each student had been contacted by classroom teachers.

Those students who did have violent behavior referrals were also referred to student services in the building in addition to punitive consequences.

Female subject 1 (G1) had nine referrals during her 7th grade year. Seven of those office referrals were for refusal to comply. Those refusals include yelling in class, skipping detention, calling another room on the classroom phone without permission, throwing a book, refusing to leave the room to see the school counselor, refusing to take the wheels out of her roller shoes and calling the teacher a racist. One referral was a disruption which involved her refusing to change into jeans provided by the school when her shorts were deemed too revealing to be worn in the building. G1 also had a more violent referral constituting property damage when she tore the phone off the wall in the cafeteria after arguing with her mother about an after-school activity. She had the highest number of referral for girls in the 7th grade throughout the school year.

Female student subject 2 (G2) transferred to the building during October of her 7th grade year from another middle school in the district where she had problems with peers. For the remainder of the year, she had seven behavior referrals. She was tardy to class four times in a row, earning an office referral. She was cited for refusal to comply twice including not following directions in detention and refusing to serve detention for a classroom teacher. Disruption was the cause of two referrals, for throwing pencils and complaining that it was too hot in class until she was asked to leave the room. She was also disrespectful, earning her a referral, when she called a teacher a bitch after arguing in class.

Female student subject 3 (G3) had several violent incidents on her referral record in the 7th grade, including three assaults, two fights, and a physical contact referral. She

also had one profanity referral for swearing at another student. Her three assaults included trying to punch a teacher with a pencil in her hand, punching a male student five times, and hitting a girl in the face during recess. She also shoved a girl during class, earning her a physical contact referral. She was involved in two fights during the school year, one with another girl that involved hitting and one that became a hitting and kicking match with a boy during class.

Female student subject 4 (G4) had five referrals during her 7th grade year. She was disrespectful on one occasion, refusing to follow directions in class when told by the teacher to pick up the trash off the floor. She was disruptive three times, including refusing to tell the teacher the name of her parent and the phone number to contact home, taking items from another student's purse and using them, and laughing and mocking the teacher when redirected. She also had one profanity referral, for telling the entire class the teacher was a "prick".

The remaining four female student subjects (G5, G6, G7, G8) each had two referrals during their 7th grade year. These referrals included skipping class, spontaneous fighting, property misuse, tardiness, disrespect, disruption, and possession of unauthorized prescription drugs. The behavior of these girls, although having referrals, did not represent a constant disruption to the learning environment.

Eight boys also qualified as having high behavior referrals. Male student subject 1 (B1) had 8 referrals during his 7th grade year. He had an unspecified physical contact and two fighting referrals, including punching and wrestling with another student and attacking another student in class. He also had one threat referral, in which he promised to hit another student in class. He earned three refusal to comply referrals for arguing

with the teacher and an administrator, refusing to serve detentions and walking out of class without permission. He was disrespectful on one occasion when he refused to follow directions of the teacher and administration.

Male student subject 2 (B2) had seven referrals during his 7th grade year. He had one refusal to comply for not following directions after refusing to stay quiet. He had a shoving match with another student to receive a physical contact referral. He was disrespectful three times, including refusing to participate and throwing his pencil, flipping off a teacher, and spitting his gum on the floor after being asked to dispose of it. He also swore at a teacher in class and assaulted another student by burning him with a lighter during class.

Male student subject 3 (B3) had six referrals during his 7th grade year, including a theft for taking another student's check and depositing it in his lunch account. He was also involved in a shoving match in class, constituting physical contact. He was disrespectful twice including telling another student to "shut up, you fat mother", and telling a teacher she was retarded and her class was gay. He disrupted class twice by crumpling up paper and yelling and talking back while refusing to work.

Male student subject 4 (B4) had five referrals during his 7th grade year. He had one refusal to comply and three disrespect referrals for making noise and blaming others, being rude when redirected multiple times, shouting "gang banger" over and over during class, and wandering the hallways during lunch after being redirected several times. He was also involved in one fight after school on school grounds that had to be handled by administrative staff.

Five referrals were coded for male student subject 5 (B5) during his 7th grade year. He had three disruptions and one refusal to comply consisting of play fighting with a girl in class, refusing to serve detention and walking away from the teacher, being rude to a substitute teacher and using the computer without permission. He also was involved in a fight with another student, which he claimed was a play fight.

The remaining three male student subjects (B6, B7, B8) had four referrals each during their 7th grade year. Those referrals include bullying, disrespect, physical contact, disruption, threat and fighting.

Teacher Participants

Teacher participants reflected on the students who had high behavior referrals in the 7th grade, behaviors in the classroom, and their own methodology regarding behavior and building and maintaining relationships with students in the classroom. Overall, the 8th grade teachers felt the students on the list had made progress in 8th grade and each teacher indicated some form of relationship building as important in their classroom, whether identified as such or not. The family played a significant role in the behavior of students, according to the teachers, but there were a variety of opinions on whether having contact with those families was beneficial. Finally, no teacher could name a formalized procedure for reflecting on the relationships with their students. Several saw that they discussed relationships with others, but not often with other teachers.

Themes were discovered by multiple rounds of coding data from interviews. It was certainly not the case that each question in the interview led to a theme, but many were created to lead to information through direct questioning.

Teacher participant 1 (T1) was an 8th grade civics teacher. When viewing the list of students who had a high number of behavior referrals in the 7th grade that he had as 8th graders, he was somewhat surprised. In fact, he said, “I would say that most of the names on the list I recognize with no behavior issues”. He also noted that many of the listed students had good grades and were bright students who did very well in his class. While looking at the list, he saw the benefit of discussing individual students. He specifically spoke of G2 as contributing significantly and being “very smart. Good student and on her good days she participates very well. But there are also days when she doesn’t want to work and is in a bad mood and doesn’t bring much to the class”. He also pointed to G1 and B1 as not being very well behaved and struggling academically. He saw the major concern with the students indicated as high behavior referral students as being one that affected others in the class and disrupted the educational environment. He also noted that, “it doesn’t seem to be working, what we’re doing with them, whatever we do, in a suspension or detention”.

Teacher participant 1 saw that he used a variety of methods with high behavior referral students in his classroom, some that were effective and some that were not very effective. He believed the way to keep students from being disruptive was to “give them very little free time”. This included keeping students working from the beginning to the end of class. He claimed that the majority of behavior issues occurred when students were not constantly engaged in some kind of work or discussion. However, he also indicated that putting students in groups could sometimes be difficult if students were poorly matched. Also, dwelling on an issue, whether from the students’ or the teacher’s perspective, was detrimental to the movement of class.

Although he did not mention building and maintaining relationships with students as important in his classroom management and methodology, he did see ways in which he did so. When asked about how he built relationships, he thought he did it and replied, “just through talking, talking with them in the hall, having those one on one conversation. I do that a lot the past two years because with another teacher in the room it allows me to pull them out, talk with them, try to be more reasonable with them, and being one on one with them seems to make a bigger difference instead of interacting in front of the whole class”. Hence, he felt that private talk helped him connect to students. Also, having another adult in the room let him focus on individual students when needed assistance.

Families also played a large role in helping to build relationships for teacher 1. However, it was difficult to discover which parents were helpful with support through communication. He saw families as being “a big part of ... what kind of effort they give and ... what they’re expected to do at home”. Without good parent support, he found it difficult to have consistency with students that moved beyond the classroom level.

Teacher 1 seemed concerned about the lack of training to deal with at-risk, minority and low socio-economic students. He could cite little staff development that helped with classroom methodology that went beyond one or two sessions. As a coach, he did have “training in athletics as far as minorities and whites go”.

This lack of training also seems to be missing in his own reflections and his team’s reflection on building relationships with students. Participant 1 was able to have time to reflect with his co-teacher, but no time was offered by administration for further professional development regarding relationships, nor was there any mention of reflecting with the grade level team during team meetings on students’ needs regarding

relationships. He saw that more as a way that he and his co-teacher could “kind of work as a team”. However, it was not a structured part of the school day or offered by the building.

Teacher participant 2 (T2) taught 8th grade math and was the 8th grade team leader. Like T1, T2 was surprised to see some of the names on the list of high behavior referral students. She saw that “the majority of them have matured because I would not have thought some of these kids’ names would have come up”. However, she did see several that still struggled in class. Her biggest concern with the given students was the skill level shown by each. She saw G1 as an issue “because her skills are extremely low and she doesn’t know how to put in effort because her skills are so low”. Otherwise, she saw a concerted effort by all of the students to perform well in class. The effort was only sidetracked by “just behavior, their ability to sit still. And ... concentrate, but they put forth effort, it’s just the idea that you can get them to settle down first”. She was also not pleased when those students were sent out of the classroom, because she considered it impossible for learning to occur when they were not present as a result of a behavioral measure. She hence had the goal of keeping them all in the classroom as much as possible.

T2 had several methods that she used in the classroom to engage high behavioral referral students. She saw a benefit in saying “[W]hat do you need to be able to work?”, and then getting what the student needed, whether that was a pencil, further directions, or help from her. She saw this as a better methodology than making demands of her students, and she noted that “direct confrontation doesn’t work”. Success came through

making sure each student had what he or she needed and giving them the space they needed to get to work in class.

The connection between behavior and relationships was again not noted with T2, but she did recognize that her curricular area did not lend itself particularly well to building relationships and that this skill was not her strongest. However, she did see that

[W]hen I catch on to an interest they have, like [B7], who's on here, early in the year when I was having issues with him he had a Pittsburgh Steeler book. So I asked him about it, you know, I caught on that he liked Pittsburgh just like I did. So all throughout football season it was, "Did you see the game?", you know. So I think that's where I was able to build a better relationship with him than others did because he had a connection.

She cited times where building and maintaining a relationship with an individual student was helpful in classroom management. She knew this was sometimes difficult to do, but worth the effort when the child stayed in class and received instruction.

The family became a part of the relationship equation when discussing what role the family played and how T2 could change this. She saw the role of parents as being very important but sometimes misunderstood by the family. It was clear that "the outside life affects what you bring to class as far as 'I have this going on at home so therefore I don't care what you want me to do and . . . ' or 'My parents don't care about how I do in school so why should I care about how I do?'"'. It was almost comparable to a battle for T2 since it was often difficult to connect with parents. She came to the point that she felt as though all she could do was support the students when they were with her and "let them know I will give them whatever support and whatever help they need" during the time she had them in the building.

One of the veteran teachers in the building, T2 could not think of solid training she had received to help her interact with students of various backgrounds. All coursework had been at least 15 years old and based on cultural awareness. None had been offered at the building level and most was taken to fulfill a state requirement for licensure. She agreed that all of her real training had been “just life experience”. There was nothing she could identify as being very beneficial.

Just like the lack of training to help handle students and classroom management, there was little formal reflection on building and maintaining relationships for T2. She saw that she did some reflection with her co-teacher and some with the team at lunch and during team meetings, but little was said about what that was and how it proceeded. There was no formal structure for talking about building relationships with students and connecting with them outside the curriculum.

Teacher participant three (T3) had just joined the 8th grade team that school year to teach a remedial reading course and language arts. T3 immediately discussed the role of a relationship with a student in order to help with classroom management and to cut down on behavior referrals to the office. She was very specific in saying, “I think a lot of them I have specifically you have to really form a relationship with and if you have a relationship with them they do a lot better in the classroom”. There were very few students she noted from the list of high behavior referrals in the 7th grade that did not benefit from building and maintaining a relationship. Her biggest concern about those students was “lots of refusals to do work or just non-compliance” that used up class time that could otherwise have been used for instruction. However, she also saw that the group

as a whole had the potential to be positive and were very outgoing as individuals. The problem was when they “sometimes use that personality for bad or negative attention”.

Relationships continued to be a theme as T3 spoke of the methods she used for management in her classroom to keep students in class. Her answers included, “[D]efinitely building a relationship with them from the start and just letting them know that if they want respect from me they have to show respect back. Um, and getting to know them”. She indicated that her methods involved getting to know and respect her students. She also knew them well enough to know what other students not to pair with a particular student and how to deal better with student social issues. There were also some methods that she was confident would not work with her students. She gave many choices to students to help them feel as though they were not being backed into a corner. She knew that it was upsetting to students to be confronted, especially in front of the rest of the class, which they may have interpreted as a form of disrespect.

Not only did T3 discuss building relationships, she was also able to describe how she did so in her classroom.

I just start off in the beginning. I have several days at the beginning of the year, I mean, we really just work on who they are and then I try to take that and use it, you know, in different interests throughout the year. Whether it's through books or I do, like I do it called 'for what it's worth' which brings in some of their, you know, as many, how do I explain this, so like I'll put up ice cream flavors and they can write them all down ... or I do music selections which I bring in music that they like to and they have to pick between them.

She indicated that she spent time in class beyond the academic coursework trying to connect with students and connect them to each other through mutual interests. She did this throughout the school year and wove it into her curriculum in reading and language arts.

Like the first two participants, T3 also struggled to connect with parents as well as she had built relationships with students. She did not see much family involvement, but she also recognized the effect of family on each of her students. She spoke of B1 and B8 especially, saying, “a lot of times they, you know, if a grandma is sick or, that really affects how they work in the classroom. And so I just try to see that is going on and let them know that I understand that”. She did not explicitly connect knowing such information about the student to knowing more about the family, but she saw that her students brought family life into the school with them on a daily basis.

As to having help with the management of students in her classroom and connecting to students, T3 made an effort to receive more training on her diverse students. She “took several multicultural and diversity classes this last summer” and had some background from her teacher training. She was truly making an effort to better understand her students, but there was no training she mentioned at the building or district level that had been offered to her.

T3 reflected on relationships with students on a constant basis. Her rule was to “try to take every day and start new” with every student, recognizing the various needs of each of her students and how these changed on a daily basis. She also cited the support service available in the building, which she often used as a resource, such as the building social worker and juvenile court liaison. She talked about using team time and time with other 8th grade teachers to brainstorm solutions to help her students become more successful.

Teacher participant 4 (T4) co-taught in the civics classroom with T1 and also had two periods of special education civics during the day. She had many of the students with

high behavior referrals from the 7th grade in either civics or in her pull out classes. At first glance, she described them as “disruptive and some of them, maybe, lazy”. However, overall she saw more positive qualities of the group such as “a lot of them contribute good ideas and are able to voice their opinions”. The poor qualities, including being a distraction and taking other students away from instruction, frustrated her during class time. Unfortunately, she saw this leading to students not being in class and benefitting from the instruction due to their classroom behavior.

T4 described her methodology with students as focused on communication. She believed in conversation as the way to motivate and to get to know students: “with these kids especially because they like to talk anyway so if you’re getting them the information too” the goal of the class was met. She looked to get opinions from students frequently and she thought students felt their voices were heard in her classroom. On the other hand, she wanted to make sure she still had control of the class. Partner work led to some difficulty so she made sure she picked the groups and partners so she was proactive about not putting students in situations with another student with whom they may not have been successful.

Relationships centered on communication for T4. She started each year with open communication with students and got to know individuals. She felt as though she had some social capital with students by thinking, “oh, yeah, I remember this kid really likes chocolate chip cookies or something. Just always referring back to that and keeping on top of it”. She made a considerable effort to try to know about her students and for that dialogue to be on-going.

When focusing on her role with the families, she also kept an open mind about where families were from and what their lives were like. She stated succinctly that “our families... I think a lot of them do what they can and what they know how to do”. She had a clear understanding of the difference between her own childhood home and those of her students, saying that “we have to go back and evaluate as teachers before we say it’s the parent’s fault and, because I really think they’re doing all they can. Considering their living conditions”. She saw becoming a part of the family circle as an issue of communication, just as she did regarding building and maintaining relationships with the students. She felt a need to “communicate with them from the beginning. Obviously if you have communication, everything is going to run smoother anyway. Setting it from day one and keeping it consistent throughout the whole year is what’s going to help that. And just trying to make sure they feel like they’re a part in the decisions that are made in their child’s life”. She saw the benefit of enabling the parents and families to work with the school and teachers to help their students be successful.

T4 was quick to recognize that most of her training to help her with students and families of various backgrounds was “hands on in the school”. She did not believe she had been given skills in her teacher training that would be useful in the classroom. She experienced first-hand what she needed while working in the classroom. She also thought that her attitude toward students and adults benefitted her in the classroom. She felt she was “very open minded and not stereotypical and making sure I look at their culture and learn about their culture and ask the kids different things about who they are and where they came from”. It was not about what she learned from a book or professor, but what time and effort she was willing to put in with her students.

T4 saw a clear need for more work on the part of teachers as an 8th grade team in terms of reflecting on building and maintaining relationships. She had some concerns about team members who did not take that time, saying, “I think that there are certain people who do have good relationships with certain kids. There are also certain kids that they have a perceived, perception as a student, and then, well, it’s never going to change”. She worried that the students identified as high behavior referral students could not live past the reputation that has preceded each of them. She believed that her role was to support students while they were changing and maturing and be proud of the progress they were making.

Teacher participant five (T5) taught science, math, reading and special education. He co-taught science and also taught special education science. T5 was surprised by some of the students on the list of high behavior referrals from the 7th grade. He noted that there were several students who “obviously still have behavior problems, but they’re not a huge deal”. He considered his classroom management of those students to center on consistent expectations and routines that directed students to follow the lead of the teacher. He recognized that every day could easily be different and that he had to take into consideration when students were not having a good day. His request to students was usually “if they’re having a bad day to not let it ruin the whole class”. He also cited vigilance with students regarding behavior as important in his classroom.

The biggest concern of T5 was the difference between expectations inside his classroom and outside of the school building. He wondered if the students with high behavior referrals as 7th graders “kind of run their own show when they’re not at school”, whether because the family was not available due to work or if the expectations of homes

were truly different than those of school. He did not believe public school had changed much since he had been a student, but he thought that the family demands on students as to additional daycare for siblings, parents working outside the home after school hours, and extended family situations may have affected how schools were able to deal with students. He wondered about how to handle the fact that each student was “[D]ragging in a lot of problems from outside into the school day, and we just kind of, sometimes end up babysitting these students on a day to day basis”.

T5 also saw a huge impact of behavior on academics in his classroom. Although he did not like to send students out of the room, when he did so, he saw that they were completely missing instruction while sitting in the office or in school suspension. He believed those students misbehaved in class in order to fulfill their attention needs and they needed the one on one and questions answered in class. As he looked at the students on the list, he noted that “they’re all actually very intelligent kids, you know, in comparison with their peers ... they just don’t, they don’t know how to use it”. He was not content with those students being able to leave the room and wanted to devise ways to meet their needs while also keeping them in class.

As noted previously, T5 believed that the structure in his classroom regarding expectations helped the students who could become behavior problems in the classroom. First and foremost, he mentioned that “they know when they walk in the classroom that, you know, for the most part it’s all business”. He considered dealing with behavior as getting through the 42 minutes of the period and letting students know that they could not allow their behavior to affect the other 30 kids in the classroom. He also focused on having a positive attitude and letting things go with students. It came down to the belief

that “you’ve got to do a pretty good job of ignoring some of the little things, to a certain point, to prevent the major disruptions” and he claimed that even though expectations were clear, there were also certain circumstances in which he had to be flexible with classroom management.

Conversation was again the key to building and maintaining relationships for T5. He knew there were students with whom he may not have had an immediate connection, and he sought out conversations with those students about their own lives. This was a reflection point for him when he saw that “sometimes I realize, man, I haven’t really talked to that kid at all. For like two months”, and he used those thoughts to try to connect with students whom he had not yet reached.

Follow through at home was a concern of T5. He saw many parents at the school and talked to most on the phone during the school year. However, he questioned the support that actually occurred from the home, and also saw patterns with parents. “You know, and then I know some of those students, too, when their parents come up here, I mean, you can see right away why the students act that way because their parents act that way too. Can I change it? ... I just think again it’s a generation of problems”. He also spent time talking about how the neighborhood issues spilled into school, including some of the bad experiences the parents had with the school. He found the battle to get parents on board with him and the school to be very tiring and so institutionalized that he was not sure how to attack it.

T5 credited his own upbringing rather than any formal training he had received as providing the basis of his knowing how to treat his students and understand the various cultures of his students. He recognized that “part of it was growing up around parents that

dealt with people well and never, I never noticed, um, even tiny little things of, ‘We’re going to act different because this person’s minority’”. He did not feel classes had taught him much relationship building methodology and he was merely modeling his own upbringing and family in situations with students. He also noted that the on-the-job training in the classroom forced him to become more cognizant of his own situation and those that occurred in the classroom.

Although T5 had obviously spent time thinking about his students and how he connected to them, he did not indicate in his interview that he did so formally with others or in a personal reflection. He discussed how he tried to build and maintain relationships with students and some of his frustrations with the family and neighborhood issues, but when asked if he reflected on this he responded, “I really don’t. I just, no not really. Um, I guess, no” even though he was able to talk about the effect of relationships during his interview.

Teacher participant six (T6) co-taught in the 8th grade math classroom and also pulled students from those classes for more remedial instruction, funded through the federal Title 1 program. T6 was not surprised by the list of students with high behavior referrals from the 7th grade, aside from a couple of students. She described most as talkative and went on to talk about the group of girls as “more, like, rude in classroom and have rude comments”, while the boys were more likely to try to be class clowns. She observed that she appreciated that fact that members of the group listed were more likely to give answers and participate despite the social embarrassment that may go along with doing so. However, she was concerned that some of the girls would do so just to get classroom attention. It was at this point that she discussed the issue of sending students

out of the room or spending time focusing on the misbehavior of the students, which led to her assumption that

I don't think that they are getting all of the learning that takes place because half of the time you are concentrating so much on getting their behavior on track, they're, they have missed part of the lesson or the whole class has missed part of the lesson because you're concentrating on them. When it gets to a point where they have to be taken out of the classroom then they just miss the learning altogether.

She recognized that the students who were potential behavior problems had the power to turn the whole class away from the curriculum.

The focus on relationships was clear with T6 when she discussed methods that worked for high behavior referral students in her classroom. She saw that "there's one kid on the boys' list who acts very horribly, I think, in a lot of classrooms but I have a better relationship with him and all I have to do is look at him and he stops". She attributed this to the time she had spent getting to know the student. Also, she believed that yelling at students in order to get them to behave did not work for her. In fact, she preferred adopting directly opposite methods, because she felt yelling "just gets them going and I think that's what they're used to sometimes in their home life and with other kids", so she often redirected them and moved on, while they individually made the choice whether to comply or not. This did not mean that she changed her expectations, but that she was giving the students the choice as to following the expectation or not being a part of the class at that time.

Building relationships was an important part of classroom structure from day one for T6. She was adamant that she wanted to continue to learn about the interests of students outside of class, and that starting from the beginning of the year was important

with students. She did not discuss whether she considered knowing about the interests of students to go beyond knowing their likes and dislikes. However, she noted that she needed to “just show throughout the year that you’re always interested in at least one thing that they’re doing outside of school” and that at some point during the year that took effort to reach out to students.

T6 saw the feelings and perceptions of parents and families reflected in the opinions and actions of her students. For example, she spoke of students who said to her, “‘Well, I’m not going to serve my detention tonight because my mom says I don’t have to’, or, ‘I’m not going to do my homework because my mom thinks it’s stupid too’. And so the feelings and thoughts and emotions that their parents have and express to them come out directly into the classroom”. She was very frustrated when these sorts of attitudes derived from parents, and struggled with how to address this issue. She discussed making multiple phone calls to parents to try to establish a relationship built on helping the students be successful, but she was not always sure that her calls were met with open minds.

Because of her student teaching training in the inner city setting, T6 felt as though she was fairly well prepared to work with the student in the building. She cited several classes she took in her undergraduate training designed to address multicultural issues, but she understood that those did not always cover the needs of her students. Since she had student taught with two veteran teachers in an urban setting, she felt her teaching methods were based on the needs of a diverse group of students.

T6 stated that she reflected often on how she built and maintained relationships with students, both at the school setting and with friends who are in the teaching

profession. She chose to “go down the hall and talk” instead of discussing with her co-teacher in the classroom, and did so very informally. What she found most helpful was her circle of friends who also taught in the building. In a more casual setting, she felt as though the conversation could be more centered on the social and emotional needs of her students beyond the academic classroom.

Teacher participant seven (T7) taught science to the 6th and 8th grades. When looking at the list of high behavior referral students from the 7th grade, he first indicated that many of the students became better behaved in their 8th grade year. However, even though the students were not a problem every day in his classroom, he noted that there were “certain ones who obviously to me aren’t any surprise because I would have problems with them in my class also”. He saw the real issue with those students as being their not following the basic directions given in class and wanting to receive attention in any way possible in class. He said, “necessarily they aren’t bad students or aren’t capable of doing the work but probably are there for the social aspect as well”. He did feel as though he had established relationships with many of the boys on the list through basketball and deemed that helpful to their behavior in class.

T7 shared a classroom with T5, and both stated the effect of having a very structured classroom that was needed in a science lab setting. T7 noted that “we’re pretty upfront with them on what procedures we have. We go through routines a lot so when they come through the door they know what’s expected of them”, and he saw those expectations as the key to classroom management. He also stated that it was important to him to address students one on one if there was an issue in class. He was direct with asking them to fix the problem and they moved to the next step if that could not be done.

He believed “we have just got to tell the kids upfront what we want and what we expect and if they, you know, step out of line we let them know”. It was important to him to keep the same expectations and continue to teach them to his students, but he also recognized that he had to figure out what worked for each individual student and not treat each student in the same way in different circumstances.

The inclusion of the co-teacher in his classroom was seen as very helpful when T7 talked about building and maintaining relationships in the classroom. It gave him an opportunity to “pull kids out on a one on one basis”. He also saw the benefit of working with his co-teacher because he felt as though T5 is “a funny guy and it loosens me up a little bit to allow me to build those relationships”. The third point he made was that coaching basketball meant that he already knew about a handful of his kids and one of their interests outside of school.

T7 did show some sign of struggle with understand and working with parents. He thought he needed to work on it, but he was not sure how to do so. His frustration lay in getting “burnt a lot about calling home and expecting to get the support and then not getting it. And then in other cases not calling home and finding out that’s one that I can call home on”. Although he was asked by administration to call on all students of concern, he did not feel as though that was always beneficial and that some parents were even resentful that he would use their time doing so. He was not sure what the answer to that specific conundrum was.

There were many training programs regarding culture and poverty that T7 had been able to attend in his teaching career. He noted that many were available through the local education agency. He had recently attended training on discipline in the classroom

that he found helpful in setting up his classroom structure. He was especially impressed by the work done in a class regarding poverty, because “a lot of the stuff she talked about, having rules in two different places ... has helped in dealing with these kids and where they’re coming from”. It was beneficial to understand his students in order to meet their needs. However, he noted that most of his training had been on the job where he had to be prepared for anything.

T7 did not reflect on building and maintaining relationships in his classroom on a conscious level. He did not think that it came up in conversation, nor did he believe he spent much time thinking about it. Although he reflected frequently on relationship building in his interview, it may have been the first opportunity he had taken to do so.

Teacher participant 8 (T8) moved to teaching reading in the school year during which this study was conducted. She immediately described the students with high behavior referrals from the 8th grade as a group of students who were attention seeking. She saw them as trying to get attention from her, and, if that was not successful, disrupting the class to get attention. She also stated that G2, G3, and G4 struggled with verbal directions yet were highly verbal in class. The girls on the list were seen as leaders to T8, and also as “very smart ladies. I mean, very capable, highly functioning, highly social”. She saw some of these points as being drawbacks for these students when they did not take cues from her to shut that part of their personalities down for instruction. One of the boys (G7) she set aside as being “different, his was worse. I would say negative being more abusive and positive being he was smart. The negative side being cutting and hurtful”. She spent time reflecting on each student she had in class and how they each affected the dynamic of her classroom.

T8 touched on some points that previous interviewees had not. She took the time to look at each student and the patterns of the group as a whole. She saw that as a group the girls especially, “like things very much done in a neat fashion and I think when they lose control of that they lose control of themselves”. She did not see the group as struggling academically, but with how to act appropriately in class when they were only a part of instruction instead of in control of the classroom.

Since she was observant of the social and emotional needs of her students, T8 used her classroom management style to help teach her students how to manage themselves. She had recently begun using a new technique whereby she addressed behavior as it happened: “when all the students see it, I say, ‘I just don’t think that you are ready to meet the expectations right now so you can step outside and when you’re ready to meet the expectations you can rejoin us.’ Then I walk away. They, they know that’s just what needs to happen. So that’s kind of the next step for this group of kids”. She used class time to establish relationships also, but she saw that as an extension of the reading and language art curriculum that allowed for more flexibility of subject. She recognized, however, that students may not have been comfortable with the subject area and her goal was to “make the kids like you more than they hate what you are asking them to do. And you know, they don’t like a lot of what we are asking them to do”. Through the methods in her class and the relationships she built, T8 believed most behavior issues in her classroom were kept to a minimum without involving behavior referrals to the office.

It was very clear to T8 what did not work in her classroom. She reflected on her own skills and saw that yelling at students was not a method that fit her own personality.

In fact, she was able to laugh at herself, saying, “I try and they laugh at me. I cannot strong hand them into doing anything in the room”. She did not see detentions after school or during lunch as being a negative consequence for students who really did want to spend some time with an adult. T8 saw that she needed to “give up some things that I wouldn’t necessarily do for other students in return for them to be on task and leaders. But I think it’s a small price to pay”. She recognized that she had to know what each of her students needed in order for her classroom to be successful and productive. She knew right away that, with this particular group of students, she needed to continue to be aware of what they required from her in order to learn in her classroom.

T8 did not talk about knowing her students as being relationship oriented, but she did understand that she needed to build and maintain relationships when the question was asked directly. She gave credit to her curriculum in reading and language arts as being a conduit to being more open with her students. Her assignments helped her understand students because “any writing assignment I give the kids, I will brainstorm my own with them and start writing a few paragraphs too. I mean, every time they have to write something personal, they get to find out some personal information about me as well”. She believed that she had to give something of herself in order for her students to feel safe connecting with her. She also looked forward to lunch and after school detentions as a time that was available to get to know students better instead of simply being a punitive consequence.

The families of students were an issue for T8 and she struggled with how to connect with them. She wondered about the differences between her expectations regarding respect in her classroom as opposed to those at home. She knew that her

students understood that “I think I’m being respectful to them even when they show me disrespectful behavior which might be met with something different at home, something that I wouldn’t do”, and that she would always try to make her classroom better for them instead of becoming visibly angry. She also believed that being a younger single woman may have helped her students connect with her on a different level because “I kind of know about their culture, and I do the things they do, and I think they are curious about my life as a single woman”. Although she specifically said that she was not a substitution for a mother, she did see that her consistency and expectations in her classroom help her students feel safe and understand what they need to do in class on a daily basis.

The training that T8 received in order to work with a diverse group of students was self-motivated as opposed to organized training offered by the district or state regarding her students. She cited that travelling extensively in Europe and Mexico was helpful to her, especially with her fluency in Spanish. She saw very little formal training outside the information offered in her teacher training and when she participated in first year teacher in-services.

Reflecting on building and maintaining relationships with students was an easy talking point for T8. She saw that she talked about students and their needs often with a group of friends, including a former teacher’s child and a social worker. She saw that time as being very helpful. However, she noticed that that time was “usually not with teachers”, and not with the people she worked with on a daily basis.

Administrative Participants

The two administrators participating in the study were similar in their description of the need for teachers to build and maintain relationships with students in the building.

Each quickly said they were looking for teachers who were enthusiastic and worked well with students, but did not initially mention this as relating to the question of building relationships with students. There were instances each could discuss where the behavior of staff members was not conducive to those relationships, and each discussed whether that skill could be taught to both new and veteran teachers. When thinking about what opportunities teachers had to reflect and their own roles in that reflection, they saw time available to do so but not in a formalized manner. However, each noted that teachers had to be prepared, with their own specific population and the needs of such a population, to address the social and emotional needs of students and families on a daily basis.

Administrative participant 1 (A1) was to be a new administrator in the building for the next school year. He served that role in the administrative office approximately once a week. When questioned about how he thought about relationships with students during the hiring process, of which he has been a part, A1 immediately noted that he had a “need to know how they are going to build relationships with kids” because he saw that as the most important part of what a teacher does in the classroom, hallways and other parts of the building. He saw no other reason outside of the relationships for wanting to work with kids because it is a process of “building on the strengths of students”.

A1 saw relationships as important to keeping students in the classroom. He saw that students who were not generally in class due to behavior may have done better if they had a relationship with the teacher. He noted that there was a “professional responsibility to figure out what they can do to keep that kid in the classroom”. The kind of teacher who did this well was described as one who understood that it was “all about talking with the kids, building on their strengths, working on their weaknesses. But not

belittling them for their weaknesses. But, it's just important to be able to talk with the kids and know that you're genuine with the kids. Know that you're not going to belittle them at all". It was very clear to him that students were able to key in with adults in the building if they understood that the adult was caring and wanted them to do well.

A1 saw the barrier to building relationships as a teacher who was unwilling to "give in themselves a little bit". He easily discussed teachers who were not as comfortable around students and were very inflexible when met with issues regarding student behavior. He also questioned whether teachers who struggled with building and maintaining relationships with students always understood or took the time to learn about the situations and circumstances of their students outside the classroom. He wondered if they spent time thinking about "what is going on, maybe, in their life to make them act out in a certain way" instead of immediately trying to be punitive with students.

When discussing how administration could help teachers with building and maintaining relationships and whether that skill needs to be taught, A1 saw his own role in that process. He noticed that he had a duty to work on "building a relationship with that teacher", but wondered if that would help with the teacher who struggled. He hoped that every teacher would be open to receiving training on relationships and having discussions regarding building relationships, but he was concerned that some teachers were not open to working with him to make the needed changes.

A1 saw opportunities for teachers to reflect daily on interactions with students and how to build and maintain relationships. He advocated teachers taking the time to do so, "whether that be driving home at night, whether that be sitting in their plan period, maybe reflecting with other people on their teams ... but I think on a daily basis a teacher should

be able to reflect on how their day went and how they worked with kids, and if they didn't work well with kids that day maybe think of ways to build upon that". However, he did not cite any formal ways to help teachers reflect. He hoped to be able to begin conversation with teachers in the upcoming school year on how to begin reflecting and monitoring how they are interacting with students.

There were many words of advice A1 could give to teachers concerned about building relationships with students. He decided that the easiest way was to spend time talking with students. He saw a need to understand "where they're coming from and how that may fit into what you're trying to do in the classroom". It became a point of not just teaching curriculum, but teaching students. That meant knowing who each student was and what they needed from a teacher.

Administrative participant 2 (A2) was the current principal of the building in the study. A2 saw relationships with students as being inextricably linked with the enthusiasm he wanted his teachers to have for their profession. He wanted "someone that's coming into this building to be excited about working with our kids" and that included interactions with student. He understood that the population of students in the building took the time of teachers because of the "social and emotional needs you might not see at another school ... because of our needs" (Appendix J, p. 171). However, he saw it as going beyond knowing each student to being like a "good parent. They're very loving, they're very caring, they're very interested in their students' lives, but at the same time, they are not a best friend, as to there are rules and regulations, there is that line". He stated that the best way to do this was to have structure and a full plan in the classroom. He often saw new teachers who struggled because "there is no structure in the classroom

and the student gets confused on where the relationship is”. He wanted his teachers to make sure students knew they care about them but also to understand that they have high expectations for their success and behavior that will not change throughout the school year. In regards to students who may have had behavior problems in the classroom, he had the same expectations of teachers to “put in place the best plan we can for students to be successful ... and that the teacher doesn’t take the behavior personally”. He expected teachers to be constantly thinking and talking about how to help students become better, learn and be successful.

A2 saw some problems with teachers who struggled with building and maintaining relationships, which he felt centered on the structure of the classroom. He saw these classrooms as ones where “kids are bored. There’s no interaction basically between the student and the teacher that isn’t negative. And, that, there’s so much dead time, or time that is not accounted for within the period that allows just those negative things, students talking to someone else, students writing a note. Why are they doing that? Because they’re bored. And so that, I see an ineffective teacher having problems with relationships”. It was not the personality of the teacher that he saw as the problem, but the lack of planning and engagement in the classroom that allowed students to be off task during the class period.

It was again clear expectations that were important to A2 when talking about whether teachers could learn to be better at building relationships with students, but he felt those expectations needed to come from him. By being explicit with his own expectations, he did not see any reason teachers could not refer back to him if and when problems with students did occur. He did have some concerns about teachers who

struggled because “there are embedded ways that people have grown up, and unfortunately in our profession, we see teachers who hold grudges and are kind of sneaky about relationships”. He continued to work on the issue of how to help those teachers become more positive with students.

Although A2 had reflected on the relationships between teachers and students in the building, he was not sure much time and attention was being given building-wide to the same effort. He saw that the structure was available “within their teams ... they have that opportunity because they would be able to talk about each of the students and the successes and downfalls of each student through evaluation”. However, he was unclear on whether that was happening in a formal structure or if it could even be measured. He saw “nothing formalized or nothing set down where people are actually looking at those relationships”. He saw his role in that reflection only happening when there was a specific incident with a student that he was addressing with the teacher. He saw a need for that but wanted to “constantly every year ... work to help change that ... in a positive way”. He reflected on times when he purposely tapped into teachers who were doing a good job at building relationships and encouraged them to take leadership positions in the building.

In the end, A2 believed that the one key to building and maintaining relationships with students in the classroom was to “be well prepared in your classroom. Take time in that classroom, though, to get to know your students. Take, it’s ok when students come in on Monday to say, ‘How did your weekend go?’ Get interested in their lives, know that you care about their lives”. However, he also was forceful in reminding teachers to set and keep high expectations for students in their classroom. Overall, he saw it as a

situation that “doesn’t seem that difficult. But it sure is for some people”. He considered the addressing of the building of relationships a central part of his job.

Summary of Findings

Through the discussion of teachers and administrators in the building, three themes emerged. First, each teacher and administrator noted the need for some kind of relationship building in the classroom and the importance of maintaining those relationships. Secondly, they noted that the family structure plays a role in the needs of students and that there was hence a need to communicate fully with families. Lastly, they also discussed that there was little training either before their service or during their tenure to teach them strategies for building relationships. Teachers saw no formalized procedure for reflecting on relationships with students, while administrators saw a need to infuse more relationship building into professional development and building directed time.

Chapter 5- Conclusions

Introduction

The goal of the study was to determine if teachers built relationships with a certain set of skills and if they were aware of how they built relationships. The eight teachers participated in interviews individually with fourteen questions about students with high behavior referrals and how they interacted with those students in their classroom and in the school building. They also focused on the discussion they may have had with others and the time spent in reflection about students and the need to build relationships. There was a specific point to discovering whether teachers talk about or are trained in how to build and maintain relationships with students either in pre-service education or during on-the-job training.

The importance of the teacher-student relationship can affect the path of an at-risk student's academic career. The research conducted in this study focused on how teachers perceived their own skills in establishing and maintaining appropriate relationships with students in their classrooms and in the school building and also gauged the importance of those relationships in the success of a school building. Eight teachers who focused on 8th grade students and two administrators were interviewed, and behavior referrals for sixteen students were analyzed. Teachers focused on the needs of the sixteen students in their classrooms and the skills they used to establish relationships with those students.

The students with whom the teachers worked were part of a middle school that had approximately 500 students in grade six, seven, and eight, and was in a high poverty area. Over 90% of the students qualified for free and/or reduced lunch and fee waivers because they were from families that were at or below the federal poverty level. At the

time of the study, 66% of the students were minority students, split evenly between African-American and Latino students.

Administrators were also a part of the study when discussing the need for building and maintaining relationships between students and teachers in the classroom and school building. Two administrators participated in taped interviews consisting of ten questions centered on their own teachers and the needs they saw in the school regarding relationships. They were asked about the importance of relationships and how they talked to teachers about working with students outside the traditional curriculum. The focus was again on at-risk students who had a high number of behavior referrals in the 7th grade year and who were current 8th graders.

The chosen students, who are not identified by name, were the top eight boys and girls according to behavior referrals in their 7th grade year preceding their 8th grade year. Referrals ranged from serious offenses such as destruction of property and fighting to classroom behaviors such as disrespect and refusal to comply. The referrals were from classroom teachers and represented the behaviors of students who were at risk of dropping out of high school after they leave the middle school setting.

The participants in the study ranged from teachers who saw themselves building and maintaining relationships to those who have put little to no thought into how or why they might do so. The aspect that was missing in the experience of all eight teachers was not about how they did this with students but whether they discussed it with other teachers or reflected personally on relationship building. It appeared as if some of the teachers built relationships naturally, weaving it into their classroom procedures, while others sometimes struggled to connect with students who were at risk. However, it was

generally recognized by all that little training had been provided on this front and that they had to learn any and all techniques through trial and error in the classroom.

At the end of this study, as an administrator in the building, the researcher wanted to determine whether there was a need for training in the realm of relationship building and whether teachers were cognizant of the skills they use to build and maintain relationships. By interviewing all 8th grade teachers, a wide range of responses were recorded and it was clear that training was needed, but that training needed to be individualized and not in the form of traditional professional development, which caters to an entire staff and not to individual needs. It also emerged that the training provided to teachers should include extensive elements on reflecting individually and with other teachers on the skills for relationship building used in the classroom and school building.

In the teacher interviews, five themes emerged as most important to the teachers in regard to their students. First, they wanted to focus on the students who had a high number of behavior referrals the preceding year and how they acted and interacted in their classrooms. Many of them were not problems in the classroom, but there were some students who continued to struggle with behavior. Secondly, once they began reflecting on how they interacted with those students, each discussed methods they used to connect with students to help building and maintain relationships. However, as the third theme, when asked directly how they build and maintain relationships in their classrooms, each teacher originally struggled with what that really meant and did not initially call what they were doing building relationships. Fourthly, Very few of the teachers discussed any formal training they had in building relationships but saw that they had learned much on their own in the teaching environment about what they needed to do to keep students

interested and to get to know students. Finally, when asked if they reflected on building and maintaining relationships, some cited informal conversations with friends, but the structure of discussing relationships during teacher planning time or team time was not a priority to any of the teachers, nor was there very much time afforded to do so, according to the teachers.

While analyzing the data, the researcher was able to glean the themes through repetition of material. The methods used in the classroom were cited multiple times and 24 examples are described in the research above. In this theme, there were five sub-themes that were repeated more than once, including (1) not being confrontational, (2) connecting to students, (3) being clear with communication, (4) having consistent expectations, and (5) being flexible and catering to individual needs. There was a direct question in the interview asking what methods for classroom management worked for teachers and what methods were not as successful.

Teachers clearly focused on high behavior students due to the lists of students that were provided as a springboard during the teacher interviews. It was directly asked how those high behavior referral students behaved in class and what those teachers were now seeing from those students, a year later. There were 21 direct referrals to those students in the above research. Although this was a point from which to begin for the teacher participants, they often went beyond those students to those not listed and the 8th grade class overall. While discussing those students with a high number of behavior referrals, teachers focused on six sub-themes, including (1) the progress students had made, (2) being surprised by students on the list, (3) noting they were disruptive, (4) seeing them

upset the educational environment, (5) seeing potential for many of the students, and (6) realizing the attention needs of the group.

The third theme focused on the training that teachers had to help build relationships and connect to students. This was a direct question of the interview and 12 direct answers were listed in the research. Subthemes regarding training included the lack of any formalized training, the use of life experience and on-the-job training to connect with students, the fact that teachers were looking for something to help with these skills, and that the training that was provided included the physical classroom structure and timing of instruction. Teachers were very clear that they had little to no formal training regarding relationships with students in their classrooms.

Theme four regarded the role of the family in the lives of students and teachers at school. There were many different answers to this direct interview questions, but teachers did focus on several needs when talking about the families of their students, with direct reference being made to this 15 times in the research. Sub-themes included the need to have contact with families, the disconnect seen between expectations at home and at school, the frequency of home and neighborhood issues affecting the school day, the need to keep an open mind regarding the lives of students, and the attitudes that may have been perpetuated by families through their students regarding school.

The final theme surrounded the final question of the interview for teachers. The group was very clear on how much reflecting they did on relationships in the classroom, ranging from no reflection at all to some, but usually with non-teaching colleagues. Common answers to this question included the fact that there was little formalized time in

which to discuss students, that teachers did not reflect together often, and that the support used for these discussions included building support staff and personal friends.

The administrator interviews also produced several themes around teachers and their skills to build and maintain relationships with students. Both administrators saw a true benefit and a need to the teachers continuing to work on their relationships with student and how that led to success in the classroom. However, they also noted various ways that relationships can be impeded in the classroom by teachers through their methodology and addressed the frustration this created in the school building. They both saw the interaction between teachers and students as a pivotal part of classroom procedure and instruction. They, unlike their teachers, saw significant opportunities that could have been taken for both individual teachers and groups of teachers to reflect on building and maintaining relationships with students in classrooms. They were also willing to give advice to new and veteran teachers on how to create the skills and methods to use when trying to focus on those relationships.

The administrators were clearer about the need for relationships in the classroom, thus beginning the first theme of relationships and their importance. Both administrators immediately discussed relationships as a cornerstone to building a classroom climate and touched on the form those relationships needed to take. This theme was woven throughout the interviews and it was the focus of everything the administrators discussed. This was clearly a question asked from the outset of the interview, and one that continued throughout the discussion.

Administrators were also clear that there were certain interactions that lead to good relationships in classrooms. They gave numerous examples of behavior by teachers

that would connect with students. One of the sub-themes of these interaction descriptions was that teachers needed to hold students to high standards along with connecting with them on a personal level.

There were very specific barriers that the administrators saw when teachers had opportunities to build relationships. Those barriers included previous interactions with students, their own personal background, and ability to connect with students on a level outside of academics. They both discussed in detail how important it became that teachers showed an interest in students that was genuine in order for students to connect to them. The administrative interviews showed some forethought on the question of relationships, how to build them, and how teachers kept this from happening.

As part of a team that is to train teachers, administrative participants repeatedly came back to advice they could give to teachers. This theme included such items as classroom preparation, setting and keeping high expectations, and taking the time to get to know students. Both administrators saw their advice as being practical and pragmatic.

Finally, the administrators did agree with the teachers on the theme of reflection. They both saw an opportunity for reflection and believed they gave time for this during team meetings once a day, but they also recognized that there was no formal structure for reflection. The options for reflection that the administrators did see was individually and with peers on an informal basis and driven by teacher need and desire to communicate.

Discussion

The results of the teacher interviews were more predictable once each teacher began thinking about the questions. Each interview began with the researcher asking each teacher to describe their role and duration of employment in the school. This was not a

factor that seemed to affect the answers to the rest of the questions. However, it did give some background on the careers of each teacher and how much experience each had working with the specific population of the building. They ranged from novice teachers within their first few years of teaching to veteran teachers who had been educators for over 20 years.

It was the second question (Given the list of students with high behavior referrals from the 7th grade, how would you explain their behavior in class?) that often threw off the participants. They were given a list of the students who had been labeled at-risk according to the number of behavior referrals the previous year. Many teachers were surprised by some of the students on the list but also very familiar with the behaviors of others on the list. Some of the students they saw as still struggling, but they also noted that they had connected to some of the students on the list and recognized the power in building and maintaining that relationships. However, they did not use the term “relationship” when discussing those students until it became a direct question in the interview.

None of the teachers saw any stereotypes perpetuated in their classroom or by their students, which meant that the question regarding such yielded no pertinent information. Although they all noted that they had a wide range of students in their classrooms, they did not see this as being an issue in their teaching or as an issue among the students. They did not see race or ability as impeding any progress in the classroom.

The answers became much more descriptive as each teacher moved through the next two questions regarding the effect of student behavior in the classroom and the effect of behavior on the future success of their students. This was the point at which

each teacher wanted to talk about how important it was to teach students to follow classroom expectations in order to be successful in class, both in middle school and high school. The conversations frequently turned to how necessary it was not only to teach the curriculum, but also to prepare students to enter a classroom ready to learn and use the resources available to them, especially those at risk and with a high number of behavior referrals.

Each teacher continued their interview, turning to their own methodology at this point. It became more difficult for some and smoother for others as they talked about what they did in their own classrooms. Many were able to cite examples of how they interacted with students in order to get their best performance, whether they were considered at risk or not. It was noted several times that few students responded well to negative attention or redirection and that the aspects that would be considered relationship building were the most successful in motivating students. However, unless previously asked in a question, teachers did not use the terminology of relationships or building relationships.

A large concern of the group of 8th grade teachers related to the futures of their students, especially those who had behavior issues in the classroom. Each saw behavior as an impediment to being successful as students moved to high school and functioned in classrooms that would be different from the middle school setting. Many saw preparation for high school as one of the tasks of teaching 8th graders. The issues of control and self-control were often discussed by teachers as they thought of what their students needed as they moved to high school. Outside of general organizational needs, being able to control

one's behavior was viewed as the top skill needed to be successful in the transition to a high school setting.

Training seemed to be lacking when preparing and continuing to train teachers in how to interact with students, as described by the teachers in the study. Each talked about their initial undergraduate classes that discussed classroom management, stereotypes, fairness and equality, and diversity in the classroom. However, none felt as though those classes had prepared them for what they encountered in the world of teaching. Each pointed to the fact that they had to learn much about classroom management and student interactions while on the job through trial and error. Several cited weekend or summer courses they had taken dealing with diversity or different behavior management programs, but they each also discussed the importance of being in the setting to learn the skills needed to work with their specific group of students.

It was the last two questions (How do you build and maintain relationships with students in your classroom? Do you spend time thinking and/or talking with others about how you build and maintain relationships in your classroom?) that became most indicative of where the focus on relationships had been for the 8th grade teachers in this study. Very few teachers could say that they focused directly on relationship building and maintaining those relationships. It was the lack of formalized reflection and discussion processes about building relationships that was surprising. Very few could point out how they built and maintained relationships unless they were referencing specific students. The methods for building relationships included talking to students one-on-one in the hall, asking students what they needed, finding out the interests of individual students, working with building support services, communicating openly with students, and

generally showing an interest in the students. However, there was not a standard way each teacher named for how they connected to students if they chose to do so in their classrooms.

Along with being cognizant of building and maintaining relationships, the discussion also included dialogue with peers about how to do so. This was even less formalized than the act of building relationships. Although several teachers indicated that they talked to friends or colleagues about certain students during the school day or outside of the day in social situations, there were no structured situations in which relationship building and sharing was discussed. The 8th grade team was given one period of planning time a day to meet as a team to discuss students, behavior, and curricular needs, but relationships were not the focus of this time.

Administrators that were interviewed also focused directly on relationships. Both administrators, one who was the current principal of the building and the other an intern who was employed as a leader the following academic year, noted the importance of building and maintaining relationships when discussing classroom management, instructional skills and student success. However, like the teachers, neither participant referred to relationships directly until well into the interviews. They did discuss some skills they wanted from teachers that could be described as relationship building, but it took the question regarding relationships (Describe a teacher who you think has positive relationships with individual and groups of students.) to use the terminology connected to relationships. They focused much more on the terms “connecting” and “interaction,” which led to the issues of relationship building and maintenance.

Each administrator was clear that openness to connecting with students was important in the hiring process and described what connecting with students looked like in classrooms, along with some of the facets that impeded relationships in classroom. Both indicated that the skills were not those that were necessarily taught in teacher training but that could be fostered in the building through working with staff and dialogue about the needs of students. It was pointed out by both administrators that the key to those relationships was caring for the students and holding each student to high expectations. Classroom management was discussed and there was a clear connection noted between good classroom management and the skills associated with relationship building. If the classroom was managed well, there was mutual respect for who was talking and time for teachers to focus on individual students while the rest of the classroom was working or following procedures already set in the classroom.

The administrators interviewed, when reflecting on their practice, saw their role as being helpful for teachers. Each focused on the need for engagement with students and how they tried to give professional development time and planning time to help teachers work on student engagement in their classroom. It was also noted that teachers needed to take the time to listen to students just as administrators needed to lend that support to teachers when they needed to discuss students and the needs of the classroom. It was seen as the role of the administrator to help teachers set and maintain high expectations in the classroom, which led to facilitating relationships with students.

It became clear through the analysis of the interviews with both teachers and administrators that it was not just students at risk with whom teachers needed to build and maintain relationships. Although each teacher began by discussing the students who had

a high number of behavior referrals in the classroom, the discussions tended then to become much more about their student population as a whole and about students who may not have appeared on those lists. They each discovered while they were answering questions that they did have skills to connect to students and cared deeply not only about their academic subjects, but also about the success of their students and the lives they lived. It became evident that each saw a benefit in connecting with students, but there were roadblocks in doing so that included the lack of time taken to talk about the needs of students and how to connect to students. There was also little time in either their pre-teaching coursework or during professional development to discuss ways in which to build and maintain relationships with students.

The researcher suspected that the questions in the interviews did not necessarily lead to the use of the term relationships, but that teachers understood that they constantly worked on relationships, regardless of what terms they assign to those skills. Each gave specific ways they connected to and cared about their students without even mentioning relationships. In further study on the subject, it would be desirable to frame the discussion with terminology related to relationships as opposed to waiting for teachers and administrators to discover that what they were doing was related to building and maintaining relationships.

Initially, the goal of the research was to determine the following: What do 8th grade classroom teachers believe they are doing to help make 8th grade students more successful and transition well to high school? Do teachers know what they are doing to establish relationships with students in the classroom? Can they communicate about these skills? And, can they reflect on what interactions foster a relationship? The study

indicated that teachers were using skills but had not been given or taken the time to talk to one another about those skills and reflect upon the importance of such skills during professional development time. Teachers knew what they did to connect to students; they knew what did not work and what may have alienated students in their classrooms. They knew the skills their students would need as they transitioned to high school. However, they were missing the pieces of continuous training and reflection, which may be an institutional problem instead of the lack of knowledge and desire of teachers to become better.

Connecting with the Research

In the educational environment of this study, the focus of professional development included reading strategies, mathematics achievement, and student engagement in the classroom. This may have left out the need to build and maintain the relationships between students and teachers that led to student engagement and could enhance the learning in a classroom. Very little professional development time was devoted to the needs of students on social and emotional levels.

Students have come to recognize how important their relationships with individual teachers are and understand that those relationships did help them succeed in the classroom. Hand-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer (2007) even indicated that “for some, relationships with educators are among the most meaningful in their lives” (p. 269). It was not just the curriculum and the teaching that became important to students, but the investment they had with individual teachers. This may not have been material that was taught or discussed among teachers during professional development time. However, students reported that “they work harder for teachers who

treat them as individuals and express interest in their personal lives outside school” (Stipek, 2006, p. 46).

Students crave a caring relationship with teachers in order to connect with their own educations. For eight hours a day they feared that would not happen and that they would be “treated ‘like numbers,’ by recipe” (Noddings, 2005, p. 17). It was feared that education then became much more commercialized and did not address the emotional needs of our students, creating a generation that believes numbers were the only way to succeed.

It was a consistent fear of students that the adults in school were not truly listening to them. However, the “relational base built upon friendship and trust stimulates the students’ attention and commitment to instructional tasks” (Collier, 2005, p. 353). Without that base, students did not feel connected to curriculum and did not feel as though the adults in the classroom were interested in their own well being, let alone their education. If students felt as though the adults were listening, it sent “the message that a child’s needs are not really important, creating the potential for diminished self-esteem and retreat from classroom participation” (P. 355). Collier presented an ethic of caring that encouraged students to participate fully because they felt as though the adults were concerned for them.

Without the essential base of caring for students, the task of education could become merely a form of construction akin to that in the business and commercial world. Education then took the risk of becoming only task oriented and “objectifies students as dispensable, non-essential parts of the school machinery” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 67). This

was a risk we could not take when test scores did actually become linked to the well-being of individual students.

Various researchers had shown that it was the classroom culture that led to success for individual students. In fact, Sullivan, Tobias, and McConough (2006) postulated that the “classroom culture may be more of an important determinant of participation than the curriculum, methods of teaching, mode of assessment, teacher experience, level of resources, or anything else” (p. 97). Without the relationship between teacher and student, none of the above attributes of education mattered in the life of a student.

Schools became lost in the federal mandates which require proficiency of students in reading, mathematics and science and had forgotten the importance of the culture and climate of the classroom. It was clear through the work of Dowson, McInerney and Nelson (2006) that “school context differences do appear to influence students’ motivational orientations substantially” (p. 804). It was essential that teachers and schools remember that they have “the responsibility for creating a favorable climate where students are encouraged to perceive learning tasks as challenges and opportunities for self-improvement, develop constructive coping strategies, where they are supported by teachers if necessary, and feel psychologically well” (Ruus et al., 2007, p. 932). A place of learning must teach the curriculum designed, but it must also address the needs of individual students by connecting to them and knowing each of them personally. This included “generating a sense of community, in integrating personal connections and professional connections between the teacher and the pupil” (Day, Kingson, Stobart & Sammons, 2006, p 604).

It is the environment of caring which we as educators must foster. This was clear in Sizer and Sizer (1999), where the idea of moral learning once again became part of our awareness. We have an imperative to “consider and then create ... the kind of environment which will hold its best teachers by convincing youngsters ... that [he] is in a place which believes in him” (p. xiii) and then having the opportunity to focus on learning. We must surround students with adults who care about them. The center of this type of education is working toward a building where “each student is known well and that the people who know each student have the authority and flexibility to act on that knowledge” (p. 110). Creating the climate and culture of caring through relationships became the most important aspect of education.

There was a variety of information teachers had to cover during pre-teacher service and professional development on the job. Problematic situations such as “classroom management, individual differences, relationships with colleagues and administrators, instructional issues, societal pressures and moral dilemmas” (Giovannelli, 2003, p. 295) did not leave much room for teachers to reflect on their own practice. While on the job, “we often forget about the connection between curriculum and needs or supposed it has already been established in a long-standing body of goals and objectives” (Noddings, 2005, p. 149). Unfortunately, this often left behind the conversation surrounding the explicit needs of our students to connect to adults in the classroom before connecting to the curriculum.

Teaching styles and demands of the classroom also contributed to the neglect of reflection on the needs of our students to connect to teachers. The whirlwind of the classroom often led to teaching styles that “probably reflect the reality of the classroom

experience, where they do not perceive conflict, moodiness, and risk-taking on a regular basis” (Hines and Paulson, 2006, p. 609). Unless there was a specific crisis with a student, their emotional welfare may have become secondary in classrooms of up to 30 students that need to cover a certain amount of curriculum on a daily basis. Researchers found that the “curriculum and assessment requirement that are imposed connect poorly with the needs and interests of student” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 68).

Various educational researchers discussed classroom strategies to combat the lack of connection between curriculum and students. Korkmaz (2007) saw an opportunity for teachers to “communicate clearly with students and have positive dialogue and interactions with them inside and outside the classroom” (p. 397). This allowed the teacher to practice fairness and also to connect with students on a personal level. There should also be sufficient time for teachers to “provide social learning activities within the literacy curriculum” (Broughton and Fairbanks, 2003, p. 433) along with other curricular areas.

Teachers have a chance to become a part of the learning by assessing and understanding the needs of their students. For example, Fromm (1956) noted that the teacher “is taught by his students, the actor is stimulated by his audience, the psychoanalyst is cured by his patient—provided they do not treat each other as objects, but are related to each other genuinely and productively” (p. 25). It was the grasping of the opportunity to connect with students that led to student engagement and the teacher’s more productive role in the classroom. It may even be the teachers who could “reframe their thinking to foster the positive feeling and actions essential to the helping process” (Brendto, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 2002, p. 23).

In the end it was the role of the teacher to go beyond the curriculum, or, even more so, to act before the curriculum, to build and maintain relationships with students that determined the quality of teacher-student relationships. Teachers have very little control over what they are assigned to teach, but what they have, including connecting to students, can be very powerful if enacted carefully. It is absolutely necessary to “pay attention to the students’ well-being and to developing their coping strategies, because these are all interrelated” (Ruus et al., 2007, p. 931).

Final Conclusions

Did teachers know they were fostering relationships during classroom instruction? Could teachers reflect on what specific skills they were using? Could the skills be transferred to others through conversation and dialogue in a professional development setting?

Although the intent of the previous research was to discover what teachers do to build and maintain relationships among at-risk students in the 8th grade, a much more poignant discovery emerged through interviews with teachers and administrators. Staff members at the middle school level understand that they used various methods to connect with students and took the time to get to know their students. While they lacked structured time for reflection and significant staff development regarding relationships and the social and emotional needs of their students, they were very concerned about their students being successful in high school and receiving instruction in literacy, mathematics and science, which were mandated by the federal government. The top concern of teachers was to provide curricular instruction to promote proficiency in those

areas. The issue of building and maintaining relationships was relegated to secondary importance.

The significant problem with this method in the classroom was recognizing that students were hesitant to engage in learning if they did not feel as though they had a connection with the teacher. Even though each teacher could discuss the students who were labeled at risk according to the previous year's behavior referrals, they did not spend time talking to other staff members about those students or researching how to connect with students in order to promote engagement in the classroom. They could not point specifically to any time that had been devoted to building their own skills in building relationships and connecting to students.

It was initially important in the research to discover what teachers were doing to connect to students and prepare them for a significantly different setting in high school where classes were built around receiving credits to be eligible for graduation. Teachers did recognize that they had an important role in preparing students for high school, but mainly discussed the need to promote diligence and learning how to function in that different setting. The focus was rarely about knowing what each student needed to do to prepare for that transition. The skills teachers had relevant to building and maintaining relationships with students were very evident, but there was no systematic way to judge what efforts were fruitful and what methods were simply ways to help them accommodate in their classrooms.

Teachers cited various ways that they connected to students in the classroom, including surveys, general discussion, meetings with families and unstructured time with students throughout the day. However, none of the teachers used the same methods to

connect to students. Neither did they discuss with others or reflect on what they saw working for them in classroom with other teachers in a systematic manner.

There was clearly insufficient reflection on these issues on the part of the teachers interviewed, although administrators saw a need for the time to talk about students and believed the structure of team planning allowed for such reflection. Administrators believed that time had been built into team meeting time, while the teachers saw that as time to talk about what curricular areas had concerns about student achievement of the noted group. There is a significant gap between the perceptions of the administration of the time allotted and how the teachers use that time.

It was professional development and reflection time that was missing for teachers. They did want to connect with students and give them the opportunity to be successful as they move on to high school. They wanted to know what interested their students and how to connect that to the curriculum. However, they were puzzled with how to create that in the current structure. They did see the importance of relationships in the classroom and how that helped students become more successful in their classroom, but they did not know how to find the time, nor did they believe they were given the time, to talk about these skills and use their own knowledge base to help their students.

At the end of this research, one question remained the most important. Can teachers communicate about these skills they used to build and maintain relationships and can they reflect on what interactions foster a relationship? They know they are using some skills to connect to students and using them fully in the classroom, hallways, and unstructured areas of the building. However, they did not, or could not, take the time to talk about that with others and weave those skills into everyday classroom procedures.

Recommendations

Teachers need professional development time, both in and out of the school day, to discuss the impact of relationships with students on their teaching. This time needs to be allotted along with the professional development time allowed for curricular areas and student engagement. At the building studied, the teachers were working on literacy skills and student engagement in order to boost test scores and meet federal mandates. They need also to be given time to talk about the culture and climate of the student body and individual needs of their students.

Although there is little material available to focus on social and emotional needs of students while maintaining the needs of curricular teaching, many teachers had the knowledge base to share this information with their fellow teachers. Every teacher interviewed in this study could cite what they did in their own classrooms to build and maintain relationships with students. They were experts in their own right and could provide much to other teachers as they shared some of their insights about student needs beyond the simply scholastic.

This topic lends itself to further research on how to use team time in a middle school setting. Each grade level team is given one period a day to plan together, but much of it is used for curricular planning and the details of maintaining the school day. Time is available for discussions about students and their needs if some of the day to day obligations are taken on by administration or support staff. If one day a week is allotted to student needs, as opposed to just discussing their individual situations, grade level teams can approach individual students in the same manner so that students know exactly

what to expect from teachers. There is a significant knowledge base to research what the addition of this time to discuss students' needs may do to aid student engagement and look at the effect on academic achievement.

It would be pertinent also to look at a study regarding what teachers feel they need as part of their skill set to continue learning about how to connect with students. This goes beyond the elementary task of personalization to connecting with students about what they need in order fully to take in the curriculum. It is extremely important to also consider the role of high expectations in the building and maintaining of relationships. It would be fruitful to continue discussions with teachers regarding the time they need to produce positive relationships with all students.

Beyond further research, this information provides an opportunity to enact professional development immediately at the setting in which the research was conducted. All teachers noted that they did not spend significant time in reflection on their practices regarding relationships with students. From the interviews, the team could begin by using structured time to discuss students and how they connected with them individually. It may be the sharing of those skills that build capacity in the team to help students become more successful as they transition to high school.

The administration could also share more explicitly their own concerns about teachers and students. Both administrators saw a benefit in knowing students and their needs. This may not be communicated clearly to teachers throughout the year. This is an opportunity for the administration to have conversations about what good teaching, outside the curriculum, looks like to them and how it may aid in their hiring practices.

Overall, the information gathered in this research has pointed to a weakness that has been created from neglecting the social and emotional needs of our students in lieu of focusing on the curricular areas. By combining the two areas, the school may have a chance to become more productive and produce students who can transition well to high school and graduate successfully, regardless of their status in middle school.

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Appendix A

1. How long have you been teaching middle school and/or 8th grade? What subjects do you and/or have you taught during that time?
2. Given the list of students with high behavior referrals from the 7th grade, how would you explain their behavior in the classroom?
3. What are the positive and negative aspects of the chosen students in your classroom?
4. What is the effect of minorities in your classroom? Do you see stereotypes perpetuated in your classrooms? Why or why not?
5. What concerns do you have about high behavior referral students in your classroom?
6. How does behavior affect academic achievement of high behavior referral students in your classroom?
7. What methods do you find work best with students in your classroom and why?
8. What methods do not work well with students in your classroom and why not?
9. What is the role of the family in the lives of students in your classroom? How do you think you can change or affect this?
10. What training have you had to help you relate to both Caucasian and minority students in your classroom?
11. As you watch your 8th graders go to high school, what skills do they need to be successful?
12. Does classroom behavior of students impact their chances of being successful in high school?
13. How do you build and maintain relationships with students in your classroom?
14. Do you spend time thinking about and/or talking with others about how you build and maintain relationships in your classroom?

Appendix B

1. What aspects are important to you when considering hiring a teacher?
2. What role does the attitude of the teaching candidate towards relationships with students play in hiring?
3. How would you describe a “good” teacher when he/she interacts with students?
4. What opportunities do teachers have to reflect on how they interact with students?
5. When thinking about students who have multiple behavior interventions, what are your expectations regarding teacher behavior with those students?
6. How do you help teachers reflect on how they interact with students?
7. Can you teach teachers to interact more positively with students? If so, how? If not, why not?
8. Describe a teacher who you think has positive relationships with individual and groups of students.
9. Describe a teacher who you think has difficulty building and maintaining relationships with students.
10. What advice would you give to teachers in regard to connecting with students?

Appendix C**Student Referrals 2007-2008, 7th Grade****Female Student referrals**

G1- 11

G2- 9

G3- 5

G4- 4

G5- 2

G6- 2

G7- 2

G8- 2

Male Student referrals

B1- 9

B2- 6

B3- 6

B4- 5

B5- 5

B6- 4

B7- 4

B8- 4

